

Uzbekistan: Eyewitness Accounts of Killing In Andijon

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Many questions remain about the events of 13 May in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijon, when state security forces fired on demonstrators, following attacks on a police station, military barracks, and prison. The government has blamed Islamist militants for the violence, and its official death toll of 169 is far less than figures given by opposition groups. They say 750 people or more were killed, many of them women and children. Government forces have ruled out an independent investigation of the events, and have prevented journalists and aid workers from entering the region, making it almost impossible to determine what actually happened in Andijon. But RFE/RL's Uzbek Service spoke with eyewitnesses about the day's bloodshed. These are their stories.

One Woman's Story

A 40-year-old woman describes how the day unfolded:

"On Friday, 13 May, we came to the square in the morning. People had gathered and a demonstration was under way. Everyone started to voice their complaints through a loudspeaker. People complained about small pensions and salaries, unemployment, and not even being able to pay the deposit for school textbooks.

"As people shared their concerns, the number of people grew. We sat there until the evening. It was getting close to 6 o'clock. A helicopter flew over us twice. We were all still busy voicing our concerns. Children came out to speak as well. We were upset when they told about going to the clinic with a headache, but the doctors told them, 'Unless you give us money, we won't do anything.' When the helicopter flew over, we didn't disperse.

"Suddenly, a commotion started. There were troops on an armored personnel carrier (APC) coming from the direction of the regional-administration building. They opened fire. The people standing at the edge were hit and fell down. I saw dead bodies and I saw wounded.

"The APCs and troops opened fire first. When they went back, the same thing happened. All of us were frightened by the sound of the shooting and we lay down on the ground. The bullets struck people's eyes and arms. One woman was killed. When we looked later, we saw that we'd been surrounded.

"We heard the shooting, and we started moving so that we wouldn't be caught in the middle. We went down the main road in the direction of Soy, thinking that whatever happens now, they won't shoot at the people. As we passed the communications building, the shooting started again. The troops opened fire. All of the women sat down on the ground.

"Some of the so-called Akramists (alleged members of the Akramiya militant group, who were blamed for the violence) were with us. But they didn't shoot. They said, 'We're not going to shoot. We didn't come here to fight. We came to demand our rights. We don't want to kill anyone. People, don't set shops on fire, don't set cars on fire, don't steal anything.' That's what they said.

"There wasn't enough space for me to sit down, and when I turned to look, the APC was getting closer. The soldiers were lying down and firing. A woman grabbed my sleeve and said that I would get hit if I didn't crouch down. I know that I crouched down. The bullets whizzed over me. I looked and saw that a bullet had hit a child behind me in the head. His brains splattered everywhere. The brains were all over us; we were covered in blood.

"The young men said to run to the right toward the fence. After they said this, some of them took bodies. The ones who didn't pick up bodies led the wounded and we ran toward the fence. There was a street off to the right, and we hid there.

"Everyone tried to get out along that street. 'If we follow this road, we'll reach Teshiktosh early in the morning,' they said. Women, children, all of us set out. We were wet, muddy, and bloody. We asked for clothes from people along the way. Someone gave us a suit; another one gave us a jumper. We would rest for five minutes along the way. People picked up and carried the women and children who couldn't walk.

"If we don't make it by dawn, they'll catch up with us and start shooting, we thought. But if we reach Teshiktosh and cross over to Kyrgyzstan, we'll be safe from the soldiers' bullets, we thought.

"In order to keep from sinking in the mud in the cotton fields, we came out on the highway for a while. Soldiers unexpectedly opened fire. They'd been waiting to ambush us. Those who were hit fell dead. Women screamed and threw themselves to the ground. The ones toward the back ran away. A 6-year-old girl took a bullet in her leg. A woman was shot in the back. A young man died before my eyes. An old woman was shot in the leg. A lot of people were shot. We found a place to hide.

"Later, the women yelled to the soldiers that we didn't have any weapons. The young men made

a white flag out of a shirt and raised it on a long branch. They were standing in front of the dead bodies and wounded people in the road.

"Later, people advised the women to find their way home without saying anything. But they said, 'We can't go. We came out for the truth. Now, what's done is done.' There's a river called Tentaksoy there. We went along the river and with difficulty made our way to a house.

"About 900 people had left the square. I don't know how many people died along the way."

Who opened fire?

The bloodshed that occurred in Andijon on 13-14 May has seared people's memories. These are several eyewitness accounts of who opened fire.

Photographer: I was taking pictures of the events. Three or four APCs (armored personnel carriers) arrived. I sat down in the middle of the road in order to capture better how impressive they are. When they were 100 meters away from the people, the APCs opened fire. We started to run because we were scared. Without warning, they started firing at the regional-administration building that stood behind us.

What happened wasn't an exchange of fire in the dictionary sense, since the shooting was all from one side. The troops were firing, supposedly at terrorists or these major Islamic criminals.

Woman: While people were peacefully airing their concerns, soldiers opened fire from the main street. Everyone tried to save themselves. There was no warning. The people aren't animals. They're human beings. They understand words. But they started firing, hunting us like wolves. Those who could run away, and those who didn't run faced death. Men, women, and children ran. There were women running with children in their arms.

Nobody cared that people were getting killed; it was so that a handful of leaders can live.

Elderly man: There were a lot of people along both sides of the road -- women, children, men. It was 6:30 p.m. That's when the real shooting started. Suddenly, onlookers were shot down. As they went out toward Soy, the soldiers didn't spare anyone. After that, we fled as well.

When I came home, I couldn't sleep. I went out on the street early in the morning. The soldiers wouldn't let anyone get close to the dead bodies. They brought a KamAZ (large truck) and filled it with bodies. Before that, several vehicles had departed with bodies. They collected the bodies by evening. I saw them loading the men and women mixed in together.

They stacked the bodies like wood in the KamAZ, there were so many. When they brought a Zil [truck], you could still see the bodies even after they closed up the back. Those vehicles left in the direction of Soy.

There was a river of blood on the pavement. You could see blood in the ditches. The bodies of young men aged 20 to 30 lay crumpled. A woman arrived and began screaming. Her young brother had been a painter. He had a red bicycle. He'd been working at someone's place. They shot this kid to pieces. There was no one to help the woman. No one could help anyone.

Fifty-seven-year-old man: The attack started at six o'clock in the evening. After they opened fire on the crowd, people fled. As they left the square in the direction of Soy, soldiers were lying on the ground in two rows in front of School Number 15. They unleashed a barrage. They also had snipers located on the roofs of houses.

Elderly man: People in Andijon are devastated. They are deep in mourning. Many people died wrongly. There are countless people who cannot find the bodies of their vanished sons and daughters. Some can't find their fathers and mothers; others can't find their sisters and children. Not a trace of them remains.

How did Andijon's prosecutor die?

Uzbekistan's official media have reported that Andijon's prosecutor died a heroic death during recent unrest in the city. A woman who was on the square in front of the regional-administration building on 13 May and was forced to hide after what she saw provides her eyewitness account of what happened:

"They [the Akramists] said that they were holding the prosecutor and tax inspector, that they would bring them out before the people, and that if anyone had questions for them, they could ask them.

"They brought out the prosecutor. People asked one or two questions. Then, when they were bringing him back inside, people got angry and beat him. The 'Akramists' didn't hit him. 'Don't beat him,' they said. But the one or two people who were trying to bring him back inside couldn't protect him. The crowd beat him severely and he remained lying on the ground after that.

"People also had questions for the head tax inspector. People said that taxes were high and that they weren't able to pay them. He said that people were right to say this, that this or that decree by Karimov was wrong, and that the tax collectors themselves were unhappy with this. He

promised to help ease the situation for people. They brought this man back inside.

"In order to protect the people who were leaving [the regional-administration building] with them, the rebels took the hostages and had them walk out in front. They said that they [the police] wouldn't shoot at their own people. They put them out in front so that if they opened fire, they'd hit their own people.

"We set out for Soy. But the soldiers who were lying in wait opened fire without any concern for anyone. The hostages were the first to be hit since they were in the first row. The soldiers saw which direction the crowd was headed, and they opened fire on the people without any warning.

"The soldiers were lying on the ground in a row. There were APCs as well. Even as we were walking along thinking that they wouldn't shoot, they opened fire.

"The dead who were shot on the way toward Soy included women and children. There had to be more dead bodies than the government said."

(Translated by Daniel Kimmage)

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