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# The President of Uzbekistan visits Brussels

During Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to Brussels on 24 January, he met the highest representatives of the EU and NATO. This was the first visit by the Uzbek leader to EU and NATO headquarters since the massacre in Andijan in 2005, which seriously damaged Tashkent's relations with the West. Karimov's invitation to Brussels was awkward for both organisations, due to serious accusations of human rights violations hanging over the authorities in Tashkent, and loud protests by NGOs. At the same time it reveals the importance of Uzbekistan to the West, primarily with regard to the US/NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.

The President of Uzbekistan met the head of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, the Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger, and the NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

The EU and NATO's decision to receive Karimov in Brussels (both organisations denied sending him an invitation) is another gesture by the West towards Tashkent, after the abolition of the EU's embargo on arms exports (October 2009), which symbolically ends a period of tension in their relations since the events in Andijan (where government forces opened fire on protesters, killing several hundred people). For NATO, Tashkent is and will remain a partner of great importance for the success of ISAF. Uzbekistan is a key element of the Northern Transport Corridor (whose main route is Latvia–Russia–Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Afghanistan), which delivers around 30% of supplies to the troops operating as part of the OEF and ISAF operations in Afghanistan. In addition, from the perspective of the West, Tashkent may play an important role in stabilising Afghanistan after the mission is completed (Kabul is currently powered by electricity from Uzbekistan). The EU also considers Uzbekistan a potential source of gas for Europe, although this seems unlikely because of the limited potential for natural gas extraction in that country to be increased. <mmat>