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The trial has opened in Tashkent of twelve members of an alleged Islamic group charged with killing sixteen people in the centre of the Uzbekistan capital in February.

Only three of the defendants were in court -- the other nine are being tried in their absence.

The men are accused of exploding five bombs at intervals of several minutes near the national police headquarters, the main government headquarters building, and the national bank.

Prosecutors said the men were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which had been involved in a number of other acts of terrorism, sabotage and murder. Correspondents point out that the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, the country's former Communist leader, has largely kept a Soviet-style political system in place - political dissent is not tolerated, and the press is state-controlled.

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