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UZBEKISTAN: Prisoners' human rights still denied

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Uzbekistan continues long-standing denials of freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners, including those jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief. Violations include torture, denials of medical care and of the possibility to read sacred texts and pray openly.

Uzbekistan continues its long-standing denials of the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of all prisoners, including those jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief.

Human rights defenders, prisoners' relatives, former prisoners, and others have told Forum 18 that:

- United Nations (UN) Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, known as the Mandela Rules, are routinely ignored;
- prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are forced to publicly "renounce" their "crimes", and are held separately and allocated the heaviest and most dangerous work;
- prisoners suffer unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, which cause a high level of sickness among prisoners;
- prisoners are tortured;
- criminal gangs used to monitor and intimidate prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief;
- visits to prisoners by relatives can be banned without apparent reason;
- clergy visits from even the belief communities the state permits to exist are not allowed;
- the food provided is poor, "very low in calories and of poor quality";
- in at least one case a prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief was apparently deliberately exposed to the potentially fatal disease of TB;
- if prisoners fall ill, doctors seek bribes;
- if prisoners fall ill they can be denied the medical treatment and medicines they need;
- sometimes medicines which relatives are forced to buy may be misappropriated by the authorities;
- the authorities have punished prisoners who try to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, for example by openly praying;
- reading the Koran, Bible or any other religious literature in prison is banned;
- and letters from relatives and others can be blocked, and are not allowed without passing censorship.

Minimum standards violated

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, known as the Mandela Rules (A/C.3/70/L.3), require governments to respect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners (see http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.3/70/L.3). Uzbekistan routinely ignores the Mandela Rules, for example in the cases of prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief Khayrullo Tursunov, Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov and the recently released Tohar Haydarov (see eg. F18News 17 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149). Baptist former prisoner Haydarov was released from prison on parole in

November, after having served six years 10 months of his prison term (see F18News 18 November 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2232).

Prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are forced on arrival in jail are forced to write a statement stating that they "with a pure heart repent of the crimes they have committed against Uzbekistan" as well as renouncing their membership of "banned religious organisations". After writing this statement, a prisoner is then forced to stand in front of the other prisoners on the parade ground to repeat their renunciation of membership of such groups in front of other prisoners sentenced for exercising freedom of religion and belief. Former prisoners state that these prisoners are held separately and allocated the heaviest and most dangerous work. (see F18News 17 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1329).

Criminal gangs, torture

Prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan's labour camps suffer unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, which cause a high level of sickness among prisoners. Guards beat them with truncheons and members of criminal gangs have a ruthless hold over other prisoners (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982). The authorities continue use members of criminal gangs to supervise and intimidate prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief, human rights defenders told Forum 18 in November and December 2016.

Prisoners have been tortured and pressure brought to bear on them to deny they are tortured (see F18News 8 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1975). Torture by the authorities is "routine" throughout the country, the United Nations Committee Against Torture found in 2007 and this continues (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

An independent human rights defender from outside the capital Tashkent told Forum 18 on 29 November 2016 that the "prison authorities continue torturing those who they don't like." They also stated that "prisons vary, and the further it is from Tashkent the harsher it is".

Human rights defenders Shukhrat Rustamov and Surat Ikramov from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 24 November that conditions in prisons "have not improved in recent years". They also stated that "torture in prisons continues" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Sudden arbitrary ban on prison visits

Sometimes visits to prisoners by relatives can be banned without apparent reason. Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov has been serving a 16-year jail term from June 2013 and his relatives have long been concerned for his health. In February 2016 they thought he was close to death (see F18News 17 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149). Some of the 40-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience's relatives told Forum 18 on 15 November 2016 that those of his relatives who every three months visited him in prison were not allowed to visit him as he expected in September. Prison authorities told relatives that "he will only be allowed visits after the 4 December Presidential elections". No reasons for this sudden arbitrary ban on visits was given.

The human rights defender from outside Tashkent told Forum 18 that "sometimes relatives may not be allowed to visit. This can happen if a prisoner is in quarantine or moved to a higher security regime." Human rights defender Ikramov noted that visits to prisons are stopped during public holidays, or if a prisoner shows physical signs of torture. "The authorities do not want the relatives to see evidence of torture."

Clergy visits from the belief communities the state permits to exist are not allowed, Forum 18 has been repeatedly told (see eg. F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

But an imam, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in December 2016 that he had in the past visited prisons with officers of the NSS secret police and ordinary police. "Two years ago I spoke to a group of about 20 prisoners about what Islam teaches and what is extremism." Asked what "extremism" is, he said that it is "what those prisoners believed and were arrested for". He did not talk to prisoners individually.

The nature of the "justice system", in which the planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed, makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else - knows how many prisoners have genuinely committed crimes. Indeed, Forum 18 has spoken to police who arrested people but were unaware of any offence the people arrested had committed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Abdulazim Mansurov, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate's Deputy Chair, and some other Muftiate officials refused to discuss freedom of religion and belief issues with Forum 18 on 6 December. (The Muftiate is state-controlled - see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). A Muftiate spokesperson, who refused to give his name, claimed that prisoners "have all the freedoms", when asked if imams can visit prisons and whether

prisoners can read religious literature and pray. Asked to be more specific, he asked Forum 18 to ask the Religious Affairs Committee.

Religious Affairs Committee officials refused to discuss the issues with Forum 18 on 6 December.

The Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, which is responsible for prisons, refused to discuss questions relating to prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief on 16 and 17 November.

Poor hygiene, poor food

Prisoners can live in insanitary conditions, human rights defender Rustamov stating that prisoners are not given toilet paper, or allowed to carry water to toilets to wash.

The food provided is poor, a relative of a Muslim imprisoned for exercising his freedom of religion or belief telling Forum 18 in 2013 that prisoners "have to bring meat dishes and medicines because of poor health and nutrition". Their relative's health was "not too bad but could be better. Meat is served to prisoners very rarely, and convicts survive on barley and other primitive food for months." The relative said that prisoners are allowed to receive parcels containing medicines, food and clothes up to five kilograms (11 pounds) in that particular prison (see eg. F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

The human rights defender from outside Tashkent commented that "prisoners usually do not go hungry, but the food includes very little fruit or meat". However, they said that "labour camp prisoners usually have adequate food". Human rights defender Rustamov told Forum 18 that prison food "is basically a thin soup or gruel made from boiled cows head, cabbage and water".

Relatives of one prisoner told Forum 18 on 24 November that prison food is "very low in calories and of poor quality". They said they have to take in raw beef or mutton to the prison themselves, which their relative can sometimes prepare for themselves. They said that "no cooked food is allowed in, only raw food".

Prisoners of consciences' health put at risk

In addition to the health hazards of poor hygiene and poor food, the authorities can also apparently deliberately expose prisoners to disease. Muslim prisoner of conscience Tursunov was apparently deliberately exposed to the potentially fatal disease of TB (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893). Tursunov's relatives thought this was an attempt to kill him and he was moved to another prison in December 2013 (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930). His current state of health is unknown, as relatives have not been allowed to visit him (see above).

If prisoners fall ill, it can be difficult to seek medical help. The human rights defender from outside Tashkent stated that prisoners see a doctor every day before work. "But they are only let off work if ill if they bribe the doctor with a pack of cigarettes. For 10 packs of cigarettes some prisoners can be released from work for a week."

Even without being deliberately exposed to disease, if prisoners fall ill they can be denied the medical treatment they need. 55-year-old Zulhumor Hamdamova and her 46-year-old sister and fellow prisoner of conscience for exercising freedom of religion and belief Mehrinisso Hamdamova were arrested for holding unauthorised religious meetings by 12 officials from the NSS secret police and the ordinary police. The arrests happened following a 6 am raid on their home on 5 November 2009 (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376). In April 2010 Mehrinisso received a seven-year prison term and Zulhumor a six and a half year prison term (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436). Zulhumor's prison term was in August extended by three years and her sister Mehrinisso will be tried on unknown new charges

Both sisters had for a long time been held in the same labour camp in Tashkent Region, where the health of both has long caused concern. Mehrinisso's relatives asked the authorities without success to allow her to have an urgent operation on an apparent myoma outside the women's prison where she is being held. Her "stomach is swollen, and she loses consciousness often", they told Forum in March 2014 (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). Zulhumor has long suffered from goitre, an abnormal swelling that causes a lump to form in the throat, in some cases affecting breathing and swallowing (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

Relatives of the sisters told Forum 18 on 16 November 2016 that Mehrinisso's stomach "has grown larger because of the tumour", and Zulhumor's goitre "is not getting better". The relatives complained that the authorities are still denying the sisters medical care in prison.

The authorities only provide some medicines that may be needed for medical treatment, if they provide any medicines at all. Relatives of prisoners told Forum 18 in November and December 2016 that prisons "provide cheap medicines but we have to buy expensive ones". The human rights defender from outside Tashkent told Forum 18 that "the authorities only provide some antibiotics

and painkillers to prisoners. Other medicines must be paid for by relatives." Human rights defender Ikramov, however, told Forum 18 that "relatives state that prisons often do not provide even cheap prescription drugs. All medicine is paid for by relatives".

Sometimes medicines may be misappropriated by the authorities. Human rights defender Rustamov told Forum 18 that "prison authorities sometimes take for their own purposes expensive medicines brought by prisoners' relatives".

Denied prayer and religious literature

The authorities have punished prisoners who try to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, for example by openly praying (see eg. F18News 17 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1329). Relatives of prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief told Forum 18 that reading the Koran, Bible, or any other religious literature in prison is banned.

The human rights defender from outside Tashkent explained that "in some prisons they have the Koran, Bible and other religious books. But prisoners are afraid to touch them because each of their moves is recorded by cameras and officers on duty. If a prisoner prays or reads those books, then it will be considered as a negative factor affecting their chances of being amnestied or released on parole. In other prisons there are no such books and prayer is banned."

The imam told Forum 18 that he does not know whether there is a Koran in every prison, "but prisoners are not allowed to read religious books", and "prison authorities do not allow namaz prayers". He commented that "prison is a different regime, and they do not allow those kind of things there".

Former prisoner of conscience Haydarov was deprived of his Bible while in prison (see F18News 17 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149). Similarly, human rights defender Bahodiyr Eliboyev told Forum 18 on 16 November that prisoner of conscience Zoirjon Mirzayev cannot read the Koran or pray "because it is banned." He was arrested after customs officials found 29 sermon recordings. In April 2014 he was given a five-year prison term (see F18News 2 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1954).

The relatives of other Muslim prisoners of conscience similarly confirmed that their relatives are also banned from reading the Koran or praying. It has long been repeatedly stated by prisoners and their relatives that prisoners "cannot openly pray, or read any Muslim literature - even the Koran" (see eg. F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

Poor conditions, work imposed in exchange for food

Mirzayevs' relatives, who last visited him in September 2016, stated that he has been forced to work producing bricks "to pay for being fed by the authorities". He is also being held in an overcrowded barrack block designed for a maximum of 100 people but which holds well over that number.

Denied letters

Letters to former prisoner of conscience Haydarov from abroad were denied to him, fellow Baptist Andrey Serin told Forum 18 that on 15 November. Prison authorities claimed 18 months into his prison term that he receives too many letters for the authorities to censor. Serin said that in five years Haydarov was given one letter from abroad, "but the authorities concealed the return address".

The human rights defender from outside Tashkent told Forum 18 that letters are "given to prisoners only after censorship. Letters from relatives must be brought to prison and dropped in a prison letterbox in unsealed envelopes." They said this is the case in all prisons for all prisoners. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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