

## **Hunger Strike Over Afghan Jail Conditions**

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Inmates of prison in northern province complain of inhumane levels of overcrowding.

Prisoners in the only jail in the Balkh province of northern Afghanistan have launched a series of hunger strikes to pursue claims that overcrowding is making life unbearable.

In the most recent incident, inmates launched a four-day strike on November 19, and vowed to continue until their demands were addressed.

"We have gone on strike several times," inmate Abdol Khaleq said, explaining that overcrowding had long been a problem in the prison, the only one for a northern province with a population of some two million.

"Officials promised to address the problem, but they deceive us every time. This time, we are going to carry on with our strike until we are provided with proper living conditions, or until we die, because death is better than this life."

Prisoners say they sleep outside in the yard when the weather is warm, but the encroaching bitter cold of the Afghan winter will force them inside, so the lack of space is impossible to ignore.

"When you enter the prison and see the state the prisoners are in, you really feel sorry for them," Afzal Hadid, the speaker of the provincial council in Balkh, said after a recent visit.

He noted that the number of people incarcerated was increasing due to inefficiencies in the justice system which meant many languished in prison with little progress in their cases.

The Balkh prison is a 2,000 square-metre rented building originally intended to be a family home.

Housing 660 male and 40 female prisoners, the latter with 18 children living with them, the one-storey brick building consists of 18 rooms including administrative offices, cells and a kitchen.

Although two large rooms were recently added, some 100 prisoners are now crowded into each one.

General Daulat Mohammad Aziz, the governor of the prison, agreed that it was not fit for human habitation and said that he had complained to his superiors on numerous occasions, but to no avail.

"Before I was appointed governor, three prisoners including a woman died of epidemic diseases inside the prison. They might not have died if the facilities had been better," he said.

Mohayudin, a doctor who works in the jail, confirmed that overcrowding had led to outbreaks of contagious diseases, noting that 42 prisoners were currently suffering from hepatitis A and B, which he had duly reported to the authorities in Kabul. Another 100 prisoners had contracted respiratory diseases in the past year, he added.

"I am very concerned about the current situation in Balkh prison," he said. "Patients suffering from tuberculosis are being treated in a tent in this cold weather. We have no other option, if we are to prevent the disease spreading. The presence of hepatitis A and B, the cold weather and the spread of respiratory diseases among inmates are very worrying."

Officials acknowledge that there are problems with overcrowding and promise to address them in the coming year.

Habibollah Ghaleb, Afghanistan's minister of justice, said 11 new prisons had been built across the country in recent years, with assistance from a number of foreign countries, and there were plans to build more in Balkh, Kunduz and Sar-e Pol provinces in the near future.

"We accept that prisoners faced problems in some jails," he added.

Before the 1992 civil war, Balkh had an 800,000 square-metre prison with open space and recreation grounds for inmates, as well as facilities where they could learn vocational skills.

Locals say the building was then taken over by Rasul Pahlawan, a commander of the Junbesh militia led by Abdul Rashid Dostum. Pahlawan used the compound as his headquarters.

Soon after the fall of the Taleban in 2001, there were only 600 prisoners in the whole of Afghanistan. As the justice system has been rebuilt, that number has risen to 18,000.

Afghanistan has legislation in place requiring two square metres of space for each prisoner, but the Balkh jail has six to eight inmates per square metre at the moment.

“These conditions are an explicit breach of human rights,” Qazi Sayed Mohammad Samay, who heads the northern branch of Afghanistan’s Human Rights Commission, told IWPR. “Local and foreign institutions are obviously watching this violation of human rights, but they take no action to stop it.”

Prisoners in Balkh described the difficult conditions. Red-eyed with sleeplessness, 40-year-old Mohammad, serving a sentence for robbery, said, “There are 100 of us in one room. There’s no place to sleep. We’re right next to each other at night. The snoring of some prisoners, the coughing, and people going to and from the toilet stop us sleeping. I am going crazy from lack of sleepless.”

Abdol Khaleq said sanitary arrangements were appalling.

“There are eight toilets for the hundreds of prisoners here, and we have to line up for up to an hour to go. Older people and the sick usually have to do it outside the toilets,” he said, adding that inmates got up early in the morning to join the queue.

“When a prisoner wants to take a bath, he has put his name on a list and wait two or three days for his turn.”

Conditions in the female section are equally poor.

Fereshta, 38, imprisoned for prostitution, said her husband had left her, so she had no choice but to keep her three children with her in the jail.

“It’s a very small place. When the children play, they fall over each other and start fighting, which leads to fighting among the mothers,” Fereshta said, adding that the only distraction available was television.

“There’s no kindergarten, teachers or classes. We don’t know what will become of these children,” she said.

Prison officials say developing kindergarten facilities will remain impossible until they can house all the adults adequately.

Fariba Majid, director of the government office for women’s affairs in Balkh, agreed that conditions for female prisoners was a concern.

She voiced concern that women guilty of only minor offences were being held alongside hardened criminals.

“When a girl commits the crime of running away from home, either deliberately in a fit of pique, she is imprisoned in a room together with prostitutes. They will never become normal citizens again when they are released,” she said, adding that she had raised this concern with her superiors without getting a response.

In Afghanistan, women and girls can be imprisoned for up to a year for simply running away from the family home. (For more on this issue, see **[Afghan Runaways Flee Forced Marriages](#)**.)

Some inmates turn to drugs to dull their senses. Ahmad Farid, 45, is serving 15 years for robbery, although he claims he is innocent. He says he turned to narcotics because he was living side by side with addicts.

“I used to smoke hashish with them sometimes. Later on, they gave me opium in cigarettes later on. And now I’m an addict,” he said.

“Even animals don’t live as we do. It’s amazing we haven’t committed suicide yet. Intoxication helps pass the days and nights so that we remain oblivious to them.”

**Abdol Latif Sahak is an IWPR-trained reporter in Balkh province.**

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