

Karabakh Prisons: A Rare Glimpse Inside

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Conditions in Shushi prison are not bad, say inmates - but they have little idea about their rights.

The Armenian region of Nagorny Karabakh is an unrecognised state but, as it seeks dialogue with the outside world, wants to prove that it measures up to international standards in a number of areas.

That is one reason why the Karabakh Armenian authorities are keen to show that standards in the once-notorious Shushi jail are vastly improved. The political situation is entirely different from the late Eighties and early Nineties when the Azerbaijanis used the prison to lock up Armenian activists. Now it is home only to Armenians convicted of criminal offences.

As part of the Karabakh Armenians' drive to win international respectability, the republic declared that it had replaced the death penalty with life imprisonment as of August 1. And a little before that, this correspondent and leading humanitarian activist, Albert Voskanian, were given the chance to visit the prison in Shushi.

Although we were not given access to its three best-known prisoners, the inmates we did talk to gave us the impression that the authorities are genuinely trying to improve conditions in the jail.

It was with some trepidation that we stepped into Corrective Labour Institution No. 1 just outside Shushi. The prison in Shushi (called Shusha by the Azerbaijanis) was founded in 1869 and won a fearsome reputation in the late Soviet period.

One advantage Karabakh has over other parts of the Caucasus, with their often over-crowded prisons, is size. In a small region there are relatively few prisoners to maintain. When IWPR visited, the jail, which can hold 350 prisoners, had 67 inmates, 35 in the regular section, and 32 in the high security wing. There were three more prisoners - hard-core criminals - in the maximum-security wing, and another six recidivists on what used to be the death row.

There are no women or teenagers. By ethnic background, the overwhelming majority of the prisoners are Armenian, with one Russian and one Yezidi Kurd.

We visited both wings and talked to nearly 90 per cent of the prisoners in the presence of prison warders. The cells are equipped with iron-frame bunks, bedside cabinets, tables, benches, and lockers. The walls are whitewashed, the floors concrete. The windows are barred, but without shutters - a fact the prison administration pointed out as a sign of a more liberal regime.

The prisoners did not complain about their conditions, food, and treatment by prison guards. Some of them, particularly those facing long sentences, grumbled about the concrete floors, which they said were bad for the kidneys and caused rheumatism. "You won't notice anything," said one prisoner, convicted of manslaughter. "You just come and leave, but I've got a few more years here. Can you help us?"

The prisoners asked us expressly to try and raise funds to cover their cell floors with linoleum or some other material to protect them from the cold, damp floors, especially in winter.

Depending on their prison regime, inmates are allowed to receive visitors and food packages, subject to a maximum limit of 50 kg a month, from their family and friends outside. Many of them are allowed to spend up to three days with their spouses in specially designated, fully equipped rooms inside the prison compound.

We were not allowed to visit Karabakh's former defence minister Samvel Babayan and two of his comrades, who were convicted of trying to assassinate Karabakh Armenian leader Arkady Gukasian in March 2000. Their families have complained that the men were beaten in pre-trial detention. The prison authorities said only that their condition was "fine" and pointed out that the International Red Cross has unrestricted access to the men.

"Both the former defence minister and other prisoners in the maximum security wing and on death row are entitled to receive visitors and food packages. In other words, they enjoy all the privileges allowed by law," the chief prison officer told IWPR.

"The fear of losing their visiting entitlement compels prisoners to behave well. Our personnel rarely, if ever, need to use restraining equipment such as batons, handcuffs, or straightjackets."

The prison authorities are also quick to point out that inmates receive regular health checks and are tested for TB and HIV.

There were three drug addicts among the prisoners, when we visited. They are treated compulsorily by doctors and are prevented from using any narcotics.

There were four homosexuals among the inmates, imprisoned for crimes such as theft - homosexuality is not an offence under Karabakh law. They are all kept in separate cells and watched closely by the guards. The prison personnel try to keep communication between gay and straight prisoners down to a minimum.

The former confirmed to IWPR they have not experience any violent treatment or humiliation. "Considering the Karabakh mentality, and their fierce intolerance of homosexuality, this is great progress," my colleague Albert Voskanian commented.

Voskanian, who initiated the prison visit to Shushi, has also visited Karabakh's other penitentiary, the remand centre in Stepanakert and said that in both places conditions, if not ideal, were basically fine and standards of hygiene were kept up.

A more serious problem, Voskanian noted, is that most of the inmates are very poorly informed about their rights, and therefore unable to exercise them. "It's no secret that many of the prisoners have no legal awareness, and their lawful rights may suffer as a consequence," he said.

He is now raising funds to publish a booklet for prisoners that outlines to them their basic rights. In the mean time, he is sending his reports to the worldwide prison monitoring organization, PRI, Penal Reform International.

One visit gave one snapshot of the jail and Voskanian hopes to continue the prison inspections. He believes that the next step for the authorities is to put the penitentiary system under the authority of the justice ministry instead of the interior ministry. "This would help us achieve international standards more quickly," he said.

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