

## **Kazak Prisoners Stage Protest**

**Author:** [Irina Sevostianova](#)

Concerns about prison conditions after inmates inflict injuries on themselves.

Several inmates at a high-security prison in the Kazak capital Astana have deliberately injured themselves, reportedly slashing their throats or abdomens in a protest against penal conditions.

Parliamentary deputy Valerian Zemlianov, who visited the prison after receiving worried calls from inmates' families, told IWPR that he was shocked by what he saw. "Yes, there are cases of inmates cutting themselves," he said. "I saw a guy lying on a stretcher with his belly ripped open and they were putting a drip on him and trying to save his life. What I saw was horrific."

Inmates who managed to make contact with the outside world told IWPR that the first case of attempted suicide was on September 27. Prisoners' families allege that more incidents took place a day later, and another eight detainees tried to take their lives on September 30.

On that day, Nurlan Smagulov, head of prisons at the justice ministry, confirmed to IWPR that one suicide attempt and a number of other disturbances had taken place.

Justice minister Onalsyn Jumabekov told IWPR, "Some inmates expressed disagreement with the conditions under which they are serving their sentences. This is a clear violation of the law, since these conditions are compulsory."

According to Jumabekov, the trouble began after prison authorities moved to break down a group of "godfather" figures who effectively controlled the inmates and held sway in large areas of the camp. Their attempts to isolate some of these powerful prisoners and transfer them to other institutions led to a riot inside the complex.

The minister was able to confirm that eight inmates had inflicted injuries on themselves, but none was in serious condition, he claimed.

The prison authorities have come in for a lot of criticism for the way they handled the crisis. The city's penal department initially denied that any crisis was taking place. Later, journalists - including IWPR contributors - who arrived at the camp to cover the incident had guns pointed at them. They were prevented from filming or getting close to the prison gates.

Only four of the injured prisoners were taken to the city hospital for treatment. IWPR contributors at the scene witnessed the prison staff refusing to allow an ambulance crew to bring out the remaining four inmates, insisting that they should be treated inside the prison.

There are concerns that the violence is in part a consequence of conditions inside Kazak jails, where problems persist despite the most progressive penal reforms in Central Asia.

Relatives claim that there is no sign of things getting better. "My son calls me often and tells that they are constantly beaten up there. They are treated like animals," said one mother.

"The conditions themselves turn detainees into animals," Yevgeny Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law, a leading human rights group, told IWPR.

"Our prisons lag well behind the system in the West.... The prison system which Kazakhstan inherited from the Soviet Union was developed purely as a punitive institution. It was only two years ago that it was taken away from the interior ministry and transferred to the justice ministry, with accompanying penal reforms. But there is still a lot more to be done," he said.

Kazak deputies have asked parliament on several occasions to investigate reports that beatings in the prisons are widespread.

And Zhovtis has voiced concern that many inmates have nowhere to turn for help. "If someone complains - about the director of the prison, its medical staff or even the other inmates - his life will become unbearable. And not everyone can withstand all the psychological pressures of imprisonment," he said.

However, he admits that some measures have been taken to improve the prisoners' lot, "In 1998, a new criminal code was introduced which included recommendations on how to treat prisoners. There have been also attempts to change the traditional order on the inside, with psychologists and social workers being employed."

Irina Sevostianova, Yuliana Zhikhov are journalists in Kazakhstan.

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