

Kyrgyz Police 'Terror' Tactics

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Campaigners say Kyrgyz detainees are increasingly falling victim to arbitrary police violence

Several policemen allegedly assaulted two detainees at a jail in Bazar-Kurgan in May - the victims' screams apparently alerted the other prisoners who banged on their doors and walls for help. It's claimed a platoon of police special forces turned up the following day and laid into all the inmates.

Campaigners say detainees are frequently beaten in police custody, often dying of their injuries. This, despite the fact that physical punishment of prisoners is illegal. Abdumalik Sharipov, a member of the Jalal-Abad human rights organisation, Justice, describes the interior ministry as "a state within a state".

"Even the prosecutors are powerless in front of them," he said. "None of us is safe from their arbitrary violence."

Police torture tactics in Kyrgyzstan are so well-known that some have acquired nick-names, such as "Swallow", "Pear" and the "Little elephant". Victims say the "Little elephant" is especially terrifying. The prisoner is tied to a table with handcuffs, a gas mask is placed on his head and the air-hose closed off. The police then beat the victim, opening the air vent to revive him and then assaulting him again.

Jalal-Abad human rights activists report several cases of prisoner deaths in police custody. On September 9 last year, 39-year-old Abdukhalil Saidullaev died in the resuscitation unit of the regional hospital after being brought in from the police station that morning in a desperate state.

Saidullaev was detained on August 22, 2000, for non-payment of child-support and failing to turn up to a related court case. The day after his detention, his brother Torokhodja Saidullaev visited him and found him physically healthy. It was the last time any of his family was to see him alive.

Abdukhalil's ex-wife then asked detective Altynbek Borbashev of the city police department to release him. The detective and a city court judge Bolot Asanbaev refused her access. A hospital death certificate, dated September 29, 2000, says he died from heart and lung complications caused by an infection to the internal organs.

His relatives believe he died from police beatings, and that the family was denied access to cover this fact up. Abdukhalil had no known criminal connections.

A similar case involved Muradjan Mamaturiev, from the village of Bazar-Kurgan. He was detained on December 2 last year on suspicion of stealing biscuits, cigarettes and other small goods from his sister. He died soon after in the local police headquarters. His relatives were told he had hanged himself in his cell but a post-mortem revealed eight broken ribs. The case is under criminal investigation. Attempts to contact the police named in connection with the death have failed.

The police can be as cruel towards members of their own ranks. Jamaldin Mamaram-uulu, a former officer serving in the Jalal-Abad regional unit, was arrested on May 4, 1999, and ordered to confess to the murder of two young men whose bodies had been found few weeks earlier. He denies any connection to the murder.

The police then started hitting him. "I was being beaten in spite of the fact that I was wearing a police uniform," Jamaldin said. "When I fell down, two of them stepped on my legs and the other two on my hands, while the deputy chief of the city police put a gas-mask on my face and shut off the air supply while standing on my chest."

Jamaldin spent 84 days in detention, where he says he was regularly subjected to torture. "They allowed me to see a lawyer once. I told him about the cruel and inhumane treatment that I was subjected to and showed him the bruises. I never saw him again," he said.

Jamaldin was subsequently freed and is demanding the prosecution of the men responsible for his unlawful detention and beatings. But for two years, officials have ignored his letters. After the real killers were detained, he says, they "threw me out like a dog and didn't even think of apologising".

Police chiefs categorically deny that beating and torture take place during interrogation. A senior detective of the Jalal-Abad police, Erkin Matazov, said any evidence of such assaults would result in a criminal investigation. He said he had heard of only one complaint of police cruelty during 15 years in the interior ministry. "After checking, this complaint appeared to be false," he said.

The head of the criminal investigation unit of Jalal-Abad city, Asylbek Biichiev, also denied that force was ever used to assist investigations. "After 15 years of work, and nine in the criminal investigation unit, I have never seen anybody being beaten by police during interrogation," he said.

Police accused of using excessive force are rarely brought to trial. But human rights activists are pressuring the judiciary to act. Four officers went on trial last September in the Toguz-Torus district, accused of beating detainees. They were found guilty and sentenced to various prison terms.

Officially, Kyrgyzstan is a democracy based on the rule of law. The police themselves say torture does not solve crimes and is unnecessary. But lawyers and rights campaigners believe arbitrary police violence has reached a catastrophic level.

The head of Justice, Valentina Gritsenko, said people held in custody are being routinely punished before any guilt had been established. "The interior ministry has turned into a factory for beating confessions out of people," he said. "It is frightening that human life is held so miserably cheap. The constitution is only a symbol. The grim reality is that the forces of law and order can do what they like."

A surprising number of ordinary people excuse police brutality towards detainees. Abdubait Turgunov, a night security guard, says "illegal" methods of interrogation are justified. "The police detain scoundrels and blackguards and they deserve to be beaten," he said.

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