

Tajik Rights Groups Plan Prison Visits

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The office of Tajikistan's human rights ombudsman has provisionally agreed to allow NGOs to go into prisons to check out reports of torture.

The ombudsman has approved plans for the Coalition Against Torture and the Human Rights Institute to set up a monitoring team, although arrangements have yet to be formalised in writing.

"For our coalition, the priority is to get access to the prisons, as is now happening in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," Nigina Bahrieva, head of the Coalition Against Torture, told IWPR. "That would mean that every time we heard something was wrong, we'd be able to get swift access to the individuals concerned, talk to them, and take action if their rights really had been violated.

"The authorities often say the complaints [of torture] are without substance. We always say, 'Let us in so we can confirm that what you say is true.'"

At present, the ombudsman's office is the only institution in Tajikistan with a legal mandate to inspect detention facilities in order to identify and prevent abuses. This is because Tajikistan has signed the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, but not its optional protocol which requires signatories to set up independent inspection mechanisms.

Torture remains a concern in places of detention, especially as a way of extracting confessions that will secure a guilty verdict at trial.

"The situation is extremely grave," Bahrieva said. "Although we've seen many changes, the overall situation isn't changing. Torture has been taking place and it isn't on the wane.

To mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, an event called "Say No to Torture" was held in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, highlighting cases where detainees died in custody at the hands of police.

Shahodat Saibnazarova is IWPR Radio Editor in Tajikistan.

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