

## **Unrest Highlights Kyrgyz Prison Concerns**

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Prisoners stage group protest by slashing their wrists, prompting renewed concern about jail conditions.

After inmates of a prison in southern Kyrgyzstan slashed their wrists to protest against alleged ill-treatment, media and politicians are asking why conditions are so bad as to prompt people to take such action.

News of the November 16 incident, in which 18 prisoners at a detention centre in Osh cut themselves in an organised protest, was broken the same day by the commercial television station KOORT, which received a tip-off from another inmate.

Other local media quickly picked up on the story, and reports alleging that the protest was the act of desperate men facing intolerable prison conditions were splashed in many of the newspapers.

That evening, people visiting relatives in the prison told IWPR that they saw the now pacified protesters lined up outside in the yard, stripped to the waist, apparently to check for injuries.

The following morning, Osh region's human rights ombudsman Ziyatdin Jamaldinov visited the prison together with Sadyk Makhmudov, director of Ray of Solomon, a group of lawyers involved in legal aid.

At their insistence, an ambulance was called to take one of the prisoners to hospital.

Jamaldinov confirmed the TV account of the incident, telling IWPR, "Eighteen people took part in the incident, four of them minors aged 14 to 16. They did not open their veins, they made cuts to their arms. They have all either been sentenced or are under investigation for murder, robbery or fraud."

Although minors were being held together with adults at the detention centre, IWPR has ascertained that they were kept in separate cells.

According to Jamaldinov, "The head of the detention centre, Satarov, told us that he'd been unable to stop the protest because all the prisoners began cutting themselves at the same time."

The protesters voiced a number of complaints, chief among them that a particular prison officer was mistreating inmates. They said that this individual "persecuted them: he went into their cells, swore at them, beat them and threatened to kill them. In short, he bullied them".

The ombudsman summed up the protesters' concerns by saying, "They only have one demand: to be treated humanely."

Makhmudov showed IWPR photographs he had taken showing young men with bandaged wrists and cuts on their arms.

He believes the protesters used razor blades to cut themselves, and said there was a lot of blood in the cells and corridors. He also suggested that while official reports said 18 prisoners harmed themselves, the true number was much higher.

Makhmudov said the allegations against the prison officer were “probably just the last straw” for the protesters, because conditions at the jail are generally poor.

“The prisoners are complaining about the conditions of their imprisonment, the lack of bedding and clothing. Most of all, they are angry that they are always given the same tablets, whatever the nature of their illnesses, and these tablets have passed their expiry date,” said Makhmudov.

Makhmudov reported that the day he visited, all the inmates of the prison block 1 - which has 27 cells each holding between 8 and 14 people - refused breakfast and lunch.

Prison officials reported roughly the same basic facts of the incident, but gave a different account of its causes and significance.

“They rebelled for about 10 minutes,” Osh prison governor Lieutenant-Colonel Samitdin Satarov told IWPR. “The drug addicts cut themselves up a bit.”

Satarov accused KOORT of incorrectly reporting that prisoners were angry with “illegal actions by detention centre administrators”.

Sergei Sidorov, press service head for Kyrgyzstan’s prison system, told IWPR that the root cause of the trouble was one inmate who stirred up a revolt after prison chiefs refused to let a known underworld figure in to see him.

“When he learnt of the refusal, [he] managed to incite the prisoners held in the three or four adjoining cells. They started beating on the doors with bowls, and shouting abuse at the administration for the way it had acted,” said Sidorov.

There were attempts at self-harm, he said, but “no one opened their veins - it was only scratches”.

The spokesman added that the whole incident was over in 15 minutes after the prison governor came and explained why the visit had been turned down.

Sidorov denied media reports that conditions at the jail were intolerable. “The medical services there are fine,” he said. “There is a huge amount of medicine that comes as humanitarian aid, so everything that is needed is in place.”

Sidorov dismissed what he called “all this fuss in the newspapers”, saying that in reality it was a deliberate ploy to “benefit the criminal world”.

He said it was also a slur on the prison service which has undergone a number of reforms so that “nowadays the whole aim is to make things more humane”.

"The legal requirements placed on prison staff are now being seen as a violation of human rights," he complained.

But despite the defence put up by prison officials, the inmates' claim to have been driven to take collective action by ill-treatment and terrible conditions has highlighted persistent reports that Kyrgyz jails are still dogged by abuses even after substantial reforms.

The penal system - in which prisons are mostly used to hold suspects while convicts serve out their term in labour camps - is undoubtedly overcrowded, and chronic underfunding means conditions and nutrition are at best very basic.

"This is the first time there has been such a mass protest action in Kyrgyzstan. This did not happen because conditions in prisons are good," said Azimbek Beknazarov, an opposition member of parliament who chairs its committee for compliance with the law. "We monitor jails and prison camps.... the conditions in the penal system are at a low ebb, not even close to international standards."

Beknazarov said progress had been minimal despite much-publicised changes to the penal system, "Reforms have only happened on paper, and the only reason they exist even there is to get foreign donors to give money."

For example, although control of the prison system was shifted - at the recommendation of the international community - from the interior (or police) ministry to the justice ministry in 2002, this did not result in staff changes on the ground.

"That is to say, while we changed the department in charge, we did not change the employees," said Beknazarov. "They continue to work under the new system with their old way of thinking. The treatment of prisoners has not changed, and abuse and extortion persist. What we need to do is educate and train new staff."

Parliamentary deputy Alymbay Sultanov - himself a former interior ministry employee - gave a more damning assessment of what he described as "an outrageous incident" that demonstrated that the national prison body was "unable to cope".

Sultanov said there were any number of reasons for unrest to break out, "Perhaps the prisoners were brought to the brink by prison employees, and were persecuted or beaten. Perhaps it was the terrible conditions at the jail. That should not come as any surprise - there is complete chaos in the prisons.

"It is possible that detention centre staff harassed the prisoners. They all come from the interior ministry system, and although they have been transferred to the justice ministry, the traditions... remain the same."

Sultanov gave a dire warning that ill-treatment and harsh conditions could provoke further strikes across Kyrgyzstan. "The situation in prisons could soon get out of control. If revolts begin, there will be no one to stop them, and no way of doing so.... The laws of the underworld world will prevail."

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**Location:** Kyrgyzstan

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/unrest-highlights-kyrgyz-prison-concerns>