

Uzbek Prison Brutality

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Inmates at one of Uzbekistan's most notorious jails describe the brutal regime that led to the deaths of two prisoners last year.

The maximum security prison UYA 64/71 stands in the grey village of Jaslyk, in the most isolated part of northwest Uzbekistan. Surrounded by empty steppe, the village is connected to the outside world by a single rail line - there is no road.

After much lobbying of the Tashkent authorities, this IWPR reporter recently visited the Jaslyk prison camp with a small group of journalists. The Uzbek authorities have been much criticised by international organizations for their human rights record, and are eager to demonstrate that they are open to the foreign press and have nothing to hide. They are also keen to show that progress has been made in improving conditions at the country's most notorious prison, which locals refer to as "the place no one comes back from".

First impressions were not bad. In front of the institution's administration building stands a fountain recently built by inmates and the walls are covered with patriotic inscriptions, posters and photographs of Uzbek president Islam Karimov.

Our escort, prison warden Alikhaidar Kulumbetov, showed us a meeting room, a dining hall, a library, a kitchen, a bakery and a medical wing, and then we were taken to the cells, each of which accommodated about twelve people in two rows of plank beds.

But as we toured around, the prisoners told tales of continuing beatings and intimidation.

Opened in 1999, the Jaslyk facility houses 538 inmates, of whom 234 were jailed for crimes relating to outlawed Islamic organizations, and 304 for other criminal offences. The "religious" prisoners were mostly accused of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a banned radical movement. Others are alleged to have worked with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, a guerrilla group which launched raids against Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. The rest are associated with other Muslim groups which have fallen foul of the state.

Jaslyk was set up specifically to deal with a massive increase in the number of these "religious" prisoners. The government blamed Islamic radicals for a series of explosions outside official buildings in Tashkent in February 1999 which left 16 people dead, and embarked on a wave of arrests. It staged a series of show-trials in which punitive sentences were handed down. Human rights groups gathered testimony pointing to widespread torture of suspects, and said the trials themselves were unfair.

At the time the Uzbek interior ministry already had 75,000 prisoners in the system, and it could not cope with the new influx. So it took over a former Soviet military site at Jaslyk, once used for testing chemical warfare protection equipment. IWPR was told by Mikhail Gurevich, chief of staff at the government's prisons agency, that Jaslyk was chosen because it was a cheap option, not because of its harsh climate or its location, hidden away from the rest of the world.

But Jaslyk soon became infamous for reports of brutality against inmates.

As we were shown round, prisoners gradually came forward to tell their stories. "In 1999, we were met by jailers carrying truncheons. They stood in two rows beating us, until we crawled to our cells barely alive, beaten and bleeding," said one prisoner convicted of Hizb ut-Tahrir activism, who preferred not to give his name.

Dilshod Bakhromov, convicted of involvement in a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999, said he was subjected to constant torture and beatings before his trial, "The blows to my head paralysed my tongue and I couldn't talk for a year and seven months. I can't hear very well in my left ear and I often suffer epileptic fits."

Prisoners said that the brutality continued until August 2002, when two convicted members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Muzaffar Avazov and Husniddin Alimov, died after having boiling water poured over them. Human Rights Watch and local human rights groups reported that Avazov's body showed signs of apparent torture, including serious burns. The international protests that followed put pressure on the Uzbek government to curb the grossest forms of mistreatment of prisoners at Jaslyk.

Prisoners told IWPR that the publicity around this case brought the worst of the violence to an end.

"We are still beaten, but since August the beatings have been less frequent and less severe," said Bakhrom Pulatov from Namangan, whom journalists visited in a punishment cell. Pulatov, a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, said that he was being punished for saying Muslim daily prayers during the exercise period.

"Saying one's prayers is not outlawed," said Kulumbetov. "But prisoners are not allowed to pray to the detriment of their daily routine." Some prisoners said permission to pray openly was an example of how things had eased since August. Previously the ban was one of the methods used to break the spirit of members of Islamic groups.

Jaloliddin Karimov, from Tashkent, called out to the touring journalists, but was hustled away by guards. We managed to talk to him later on, however. Karimov was among four prisoners tortured - or "pressured", to use prison slang - to make them renounce Hizb ut-Tahrir ideals. This led to the deaths of Avazov and Alimov.

"In the middle of June (2002), four of us were put in a basement and told to renounce our ideas. As proof, we were ordered to write a letter of repentance addressed to President Karimov and to sing the national anthem of Uzbekistan," he said. "Conditions were unbearable. There was so little air that we felt faint."

"In August, I was transferred to Cell 15, which held criminals brought in from other prisons. They beat me, picked me up by my arms and legs and threw me in the air. My collarbone broke when I hit the ground. Then they stripped me and began to rape me."

Jalodiddin says that he survived only by starting to sing the national anthem, one of the authorities' demands. He wrote the letter of repentance, and was sent to Tashkent and operated on. He is currently awaiting a second operation. One of the other prisoners placed in Cell 15, Nomoz Zafarov, also gave in to his tormentors' demands and has since been transferred to a jail in Navoi. Avazov and Alimov refused to give in and eventually died.

Officials claim that the two men died during a fight among prisoners. "We didn't see it happening, so we couldn't stop it. However, several employees were fired, some prisoners were put on trial and I myself was given a harsh reprimand," said Kulumbetov, the warden.

Under scrutiny from international human rights organisations following the incident, the authorities did their best to turn Jaslyk into something like a model prison. They even gave permission to outsiders to visit - provided they had a few days' notice.

"Today we were fed well because of your visit, but tomorrow will probably be different," said Makhmudali Yusupov from Fergana, a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir.

But the food was not Yusupov's main concern. "The problem is that we are in prison for nothing. Being a Muslim is the reason for my arrest... I haven't done anything criminal," he said.

Prisoners said that the lack of nutritious food has encouraged tuberculosis, which has spread because sick patients are not placed in quarantine.

Many face 15 or 16 years in prison, but doubt if they will survive that long. The state amnestied around 1,900 religious prisoners in 2001 and 2002. Those serving longer sentences, however, were excluded from the pardon.

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