

Uzbekistan Fails Amnestied Prisoners

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Tashkent government failing to deliver on pledge to help amnestied prisoners.

Many of the thousands of Uzbek prisoners amnestied several months ago are struggling to adjust to their newfound freedom, despite efforts by the government to help them settle back into civilian life.

Some of those released under the September 1 amnesty decree have already returned to crime. Many have yet to receive medical checks, even though they left jails where tuberculosis and others diseases are rampant.

The authorities say the long-awaited amnesty, which coincided with the tenth anniversary of Uzbek independence, is proof of the country's progress towards political liberalisation. President Islam Karimov said it formed an integral component of on-going judicial reforms.

The decree authorised the immediate release of 25,000 inmates - just under half the prison population. The same number again had their sentences reduced by up to 50 per cent.

Those released included over 70 per cent of women inmates; around 85 per cent of those who committed their crimes while minors; and around half of those with disabilities or illnesses.

Khokimyats, local administrations, were ordered to set up special centres throughout the country to help freed prisoners adjust to civilian life.

Under a government scheme, they are entitled to receive a one-off payment of about ten US dollars, around four times the minimum monthly wage; free medical check-ups and help with finding work.

But some of the centres have been slow in making the payments and lack of resources means that former prisoners have been refused medical checks.

In the Urtachirchik region of the Tashkent oblast, 28 amnestied prisoners - three of them ill with tuberculosis - complained that they were forced to pay for healthcare services.

One of the TB sufferers, Mahmood, was charged the equivalent of one and a half dollars for an x-ray. "Where could someone who's just got out of prison get that sort of money from?" he said. "They don't even give the proper benefit out on time."

In the Khorezm oblast, 183 out of 325 people freed under the amnesty have yet to receive a medical check.

Few of the released prisoners have found jobs, despite government instructions that they should be given employment under existing regulations obliging enterprises to provide work for vulnerable individuals.

The regulations cover every organisation, establishment and business, irrespective of its type of ownership, but only 1,024 former prisoners have been found work so far out of a quota of 33,815 such places, the public prosecution office says.

"Finding work for them is very difficult," said a senior official at one of the special centres in Khorezm oblast. "Enterprises stubbornly refuse people who have been amnestied."

She said her centre had been able to find jobs for only three of the 23 ex-prisoners it was dealing with, "and in those cases they were helped by relatives who were working at enterprises".

A commission from the public prosecution office is travelling the country to enforce the regulations.

The plight of the amnestied prisoners is made worse by the economic crisis that hit Uzbekistan while they were incarcerated. Now, the legal minimum wage of 3,430 som, just over two dollars, will only buy half a bag of flour.

The former inmates complain at the lack of understanding they encounter among local bureaucrats. Some have become so desperate that they've returned to crime. In the town of Angren alone, 20 amnestied prisoners have re-offended.

Others stand at the roadside with scraps of paper in their hands, inscribed with messages such as, "Help me buy bread, just back from prison, wife [or husband] sick..."

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