

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Tajikistan

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Introduction

1. This submission highlights Human Rights Watch's key concerns regarding the Tajik government's compliance with its international obligations since its last Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2021. Since then, in November 2021 and May 2022 Tajik authorities carried out violent crackdowns on peaceful protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). They have also systematic sought to crush civil society through mass NGO closures and imposition of legal restrictions, and in transnational repression of government critics and dissidents living abroad, particularly in Europe including Turkey and Russia. Tajik forces committed apparent war crimes during a border dispute with Kyrgyzstan in September 2022.

2. Throughout this period, the Tajik government failed to implement any of the recommendations it accepted during its third-cycle UPR review in November 2021. These include recommendations to "strengthen the legal framework to ensure access to information and the exercise of freedom of expression and association, particularly by civil society and human rights defenders, ensuring that they can express themselves freely, without fear of reprisals"[1], to "implement the 11 recommendations from the previous cycle on the right to a fair trial, the independence of the judiciary and measures to protect lawyers"[2], and to "cease reprisals, violence and pressure on political opposition, civil society activists, human rights non-governmental organizations, journalists and members of their families"[3] among many others. As set out below, Tajikistan has not merely failed to implement these commitments, but openly flouted them.

FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT OBLIGATIONS

3. On October 9, Russian President Vladimir Putin, wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), entered Tajikistan, an ICC member country, to attend a Russia-Central Asia summit and a meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States and did not face arrest. According to a media report, ICC judges ruled in March 2026 that Tajikistan failed to comply with its obligation to arrest Putin.

Recommendation:

- Implement the Rome Statute in national legislation, incorporating provisions to cooperate promptly and fully with the International Criminal Court and to investigate and prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes before its national courts in accordance with international law.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH KYRGYZSTAN AND APPARENT WAR CRIMES

4. On 14 September 2022, tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan over their never-fully-demarcated border erupted into armed conflict spread along a roughly 110-kilometer stretch of disputed border in and around the Ferghana valley. The fighting lasted four days,

[1] Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Tajikistan*, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/49/12 (January 6, 2022), recommendations 123.67(Costa Rica)
[2] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.135 (Australia)
[3] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.156 (Belgium)

until 17 September. Human Rights Watch found that both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan forces committed apparent war crimes in attacks on civilians during this conflict, although this submission focuses on those attributable to Tajik forces.

Violations by Tajik Forces

5. HRW found that Tajik forces shot and killed at least eight civilians on that 16 September, including older men with disabilities in their homes.

6. One documented incident involved Myrzakmat Hamidov, a 72-year-old retired man from Kyrgyzstan, who was killed in his garden in Borborduk. The village was under the control of Tajik forces at the time. His wife recounted: "He came and stayed here [in the garden]. Then I entered the neighbor's basement and sat there. After 30 minutes, my daughter called me saying that her dad, who had been answering her calls, was not answering any more. And then I came running. As I came, my husband was lying there [on the ground]. Somebody had covered him."

7. In another incident, Abboz, a 14-year-old Kyrgyz boy, saw his father, Suhrob Kenjebaev, killed in front of him, as the family's car came under fire. Abboz's mother, who was wounded, told him to keep silent when Tajik soldiers surrounded the car. They eventually left the family for dead.

8. Beyond individual killings, HRW documented that during their brief occupation of Kyrgyz villages, large-scale looting and burning of private property took place in Kyrgyz villages while they were under the control of Tajik forces. Hundreds of homes and other types of civilian infrastructure, such as kindergartens, schools, medical facilities, and official buildings, were set on fire in an apparent attempt to clear the area of its population.

9. Under international humanitarian law, the deliberate killing of civilians, looting, and attacks on infrastructure not primarily used for military purposes are all war crimes.

Non-Cooperation and Persistent Impunity

10. Notably, the Tajik government did not respond to Human Rights Watch's letters submitting questions about the conflict in December 2022 and March 2023. As of 2025, neither side has publicized information indicating that perpetrators from their own forces were held to account for violations they committed during the conflict.

11. In March 2025, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed an agreement over their contested border, which included a plan for land swaps of equal size and the shared management and use of water resources and facilities. While this is an important step forward, it is essential to address the apparent war crimes committed by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan forces in 2022, and bring those responsible to account.

Recommendations

- Conduct a thorough and independent investigation into violations of international humanitarian law committed by Tajik forces during the September 2022 border conflict, including killings of civilians, destruction of civilian property, and attacks on fleeing persons.
- Ensure those found responsible are prosecuted and held to account, and that victims and families receive adequate reparations.
- Endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.

VIOLENT CRACKDOWN ON PEACEFUL PROTEST IN THE GBAO

12. In May 2022, Tajik authorities cracked down on protesters in an autonomous region of the country, resulting in the death of a local man by what witnesses reported was live ammunition fired by security forces. In the next couple of days, police reportedly killed up to 40 people from the area during so-called security operations.

13. The protests began peacefully on May 16, 2022, in Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakshan autonomous region (GBAO), with people demanding an end to harassment and alleged persecution of local people by Tajik authorities.

14. Over the next two days, police blocked and dispersed protesters using rubber bullets and teargas, reportedly with excessive force. Police also reportedly carried out killings and arbitrarily detained and tortured more than two hundred protesters and local people, who were prosecuted behind closed doors. Despite the government of Tajikistan supporting recommendation 123.122[4] in the last UPR cycle, no law enforcement official has prosecuted in connection with the abusive response.

15. There has been no accountability for the crackdown on protesters, which authorities called an "anti-terrorism operation." At least six civil society activists who stood up for the rights of the Pamiris, a culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct ethnic minority living in the region that has been historically persecuted by authorities, are still imprisoned – notwithstanding recommendation 123.168[5]

16. By 2023, 205 GBAO residents had been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment following closed trials in relation to peaceful protests in the region in 2021 and 2022. Eleven people received life imprisonment sentences, 85 received terms of 10-29 years, and 53 received terms of 1.5-9 years. At least 20 human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists critical of the government's actions in GBAO in 2022 were imprisoned and serving lengthy sentences at time of writing

17. Since the protests, Pamiris have reportedly been prohibited from speaking their languages in public and from hosting prayer meetings in their homes. At a high-level UN meeting in 2023, Tajikistan's justice minister, Muzaffar Ashuriyon, denied that the Pamiris are a distinct ethnic

[4] Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Tajikistan*, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/49/12 (January 6, 2022), recommendation 123.122 (Fiji)

[5] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.168 (United States of America): "Allow civil society, including non-governmental organizations and independent media, to operate without harassment and fear of reprisals"

minority. Hundreds of nongovernmental groups in the region and the country have been forced to close.

Imprisonment of GBAO Lawyers and Human Rights Defenders

18. Authorities have particularly targeted lawyers and HRDs in the context of the crackdown in GBAO, despite Tajikistan's acceptance of the prior UPR recommendation to ensure that "lawyers are guaranteed full independence and safety, in law and in practice, to carry out their legitimate duties without any harassment, undue interference or fear of arbitrary criminal prosecution or other retaliatory measures."[6] At least six civil society activists, lawyers, and human rights defenders have received lengthy prison terms after closed, unfair trials. Those convicted include:

    a. Faromuz Irgashov, a lawyer who headed Commission 44, an independent group established in GBAO in 2021 to investigate the November protest, sentenced to 30 years;
    b. Muzaffar Muborakshoev, a civil rights activist, sentenced to 29 years;
    c. Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, head of the Association of Lawyers in Pamir, sentenced to 15 years (later revised to 16 years);
    d. Khushruz Djumaev, a civil rights activist and blogger, sentenced to 8 years.
    e. Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, a 65-year-old independent journalist and civil rights activist, sentenced to 21 years on charges of conspiring against the state and organizing the protests.
    f. Khursand Mamadshoev, lawyer, member of Commission 44 and brother of Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, sentenced to 18 years;

19. The trials of these Gorno-Badakshan activists were held behind closed doors without access to lawyers or evidence against them, in violation of fundamental fair trial standards. All were charged with 'participation in a criminal association' under article 187 of the Criminal Code of Tajikistan."

Deaths in Custody in 2025

20. In 2025, five ethnic Pamiri activists died in custody – all five men had been detained following the government's violent crackdown on protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in May 2022. Some died after being denied medical care. Information about one of the men, who died in February, became public only in late August 2025. The five prisoners who died were:
    - Kulmamad Pallaev, 50, a civic activist from Rushan in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, who died in January;
    - Bogsho Imatshoev, 67, a Pamiri supporter of the banned opposition party Group 24, who died in February;
    - Aslan Gulobov, 35, a civic activist from Khorog, who died in June;
    - Muzaffar Davlatmirov, 61, an Ismaili cleric from Khorog, who was ostensibly imprisoned for leading funerals following the May 2022 crackdown, who died in June; and
    - Eronsho Mamadrahimov, 39, who died in July.

[6] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.166 (Norway)

21. None of these deaths have been investigated by the Tajik authorities, despite supported recommendation 123.136.[7]

Recommendations

- Immediately and unconditionally release all HRDs, lawyers, journalists, and civil society activists imprisoned in connection with the GBAO protests of November 2021 and May 2022.
- Ensure effective, independent, and transparent investigations into the killings of protesters, all deaths in custody and reports of torture in detention.
- Guarantee that lawyers may represent clients in GBAO-related cases without fear of retaliation, and ensure access to counsel in all criminal proceedings.
- Cease the practice of holding trials behind closed doors and in detention facilities.

RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND FREEDOM OF MEDIA

22. Since the last UPR cycle, the Tajik government has deliberately decimated independent civil society – notwithstanding supporting recommendation 123.168[8]

23. After more than 500 closures in 2022, Tajik authorities announced the closure of 239 more NGOs in the first half of 2023, either by court decision or by self-liquidation. The closures severely impacted groups connected to the GBAO, the Aga Khan network, or conducting human rights work.

24. Tajikistan also flouted its commitment to "promote and protect the right to freedom of expression and media freedom",[9] to "ensure freedom of expression and the freedom of the media, including on the Internet, in accordance with international human rights norms"[10].

25. Online media and free expression have been systematically suppressed alongside the physical closure of organisations. In June 2023, Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned the Group 24 website 'Novyi Tadjikistan 2' (New Tajikistan 2), deeming it an 'extremist' organization, and also banned its authors' pages on Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Cooperation with the website is punishable by imprisonment of up to eight years. A week earlier, the Supreme Court banned 'Pamir Daily News,' an online media outlet focusing on news from GBAO, also deeming it an 'extremist' organization. The outlet was among the few media organizations to have covered the crackdown in GBAO in 2022.

26. Over the summer 2024 Tajik authorities conducted a series of arrests of a handful of prominent figures, including Shokirjon Khakimov, a human rights lawyer, publicist, and

[7] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.136 (Austria): "Ensure that thorough and impartial investigations are carried out into all deaths in custody as well as all allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and implement the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, based on his country visits."
[8] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.168 (United States of America): "Allow civil society, including non-governmental organizations and independent media, to operate without harassment and fear of reprisals.""
[9] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.144 (Latvia).
[10] *Ibid,* recommendation 123.145 (Slovakia).

deputy chairman of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The detainees, former and current politicians, are charged with high treason for allegedly plotting to seize power. Their access to legal representation has been severely limited, with their lawyers unable, at time of writing, to meet their clients.

27. In February 2025, the Supreme Court convicted Ruhshona Khakimova, an investigative journalist, on classified charges, with no public record of what she was accused or convicted of, sentencing her to eight years in prison following a closed trial. Khakimova is the niece of Shokirjon Khakimov, whose case is discussed above. Khakimova was imprisoned despite her having two young children, one of whom was barely 8 months old at the time of her imprisonment.

28. In May 2025, an international conference of Central Asian women journalists, which was to be held in Dushanbe, was abruptly cancelled by management of the venue on reportedly government orders on the eve of the event with no explanation.

29. As of 2026 seven journalists remain in prison because their reporting was critical of the government.

Recommendations

- End all politically motivated closures of NGOs and civil society organizations; allow closed organizations to re-register and resume operations.
- Release all political prisoners, including Shokirjon Khakimov.
- End the practice of labeling civil society organizations, opposition media, and websites as "extremist" to silence their work.
- Release all journalists and bloggers imprisoned for their coverage of the GBAO crackdown and other government policies, including Khushom Gulom, Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, and Rukhshona Khakimova.
- Unblock websites and commit to not restricting internet access including in crisis situations in accordance with the accepted UPR recommendation (Rec. 118.52).

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF CRITICS AND DISSIDENTS ABROAD

30. For over a decade, the Tajik authorities have conducted a severe and wide-ranging crackdown on political opponents, dissidents, journalists, and human rights defenders living in Europe including Türkiye and Russia. Many of those targeted are members of banned political opposition groups such as Group 24 and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). This campaign involves enforced disappearances, unlawful renditions, abusive use of Interpol Red Notices, harassment of family members in Tajikistan, and pressure on host governments to deport or extradite Tajik nationals at risk of torture.

31. Türkiye has been a principal location where Tajik authorities have pursued opponents. Many of the Tajik targets of transnational repression Human Rights Watch spoke to were living in Türkiye. In February and March 2024, two senior figures of Group 24, Nasimjon Sharifov and Sukhrob Zafar, disappeared in Türkiye. They later resurfaced in Tajikistan in detention, with signs of torture and ill-treatment, and were sentenced to 20 and 30 years in prison,

respectively, after a closed trial on unpublished charges.

32. The use of renditions targeting Pamiri diaspora leaders in Russia increased between November 2021 and August 2022 with at least 7 activists forcibly disappeared and kidnapped to Tajikistan, including two ethnic Pamiris with Russian citizenship. A diaspora group has raised concerns authorities may have tortured and otherwise abused them in detention.

33. Among those targeted were Oraz Vazirbekov and Ramzi Vazirbekov: two unrelated men who are both Russian citizens, were reported missing at Moscow's Domodedovo airport on July 29, 2022. They reappeared in a televised speech in Tajikistan in which they said they had returned to Tajikistan voluntarily to assist the official investigation into the events leading to the November 2021 protests. Previously, Oraz Vazirbekov had expressed fears of being kidnapped by the Tajik special services.

34. In 2023, Germany, on separate occasions, deported two Tajik dissidents, Abdullohi Shamsiddin and Bilol Qurbonaliev, to Tajikistan. Upon arrival, they were immediately detained and later sentenced to 7 and 10 years in prison, respectively, based on bogus charges of attempts to overthrow the constitutional order and organization of criminal groups. Shamsiddin has reportedly been mistreated in detention.

35. In November 2024, Dilmurod Ergashev, a Tajik opposition activist was deported from Germany, after being refused asylum – according to witness statements upon his arrival Tajikistan authorities immediately handcuffed him, placed a black bag over his head, put him into a vehicle and drove away. He was subsequently arrested and eventually sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of "publicly calling for extremist activity" – the trial took place behind closed doors.

Recommendations

- Immediately cease all acts of transnational repression against Tajik nationals abroad, including enforced disappearances and coerced returns.
- Release all individuals returned to Tajikistan through unlawful renditions or deportations who are being held on politically motivated charges.