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Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 - Uzbekistan

Head of state: Islam Karimov

Head of government: Shavkat Mirzioiev

Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes

Population: 27.8 million

Life expectancy: 68.3 years

Under-5 mortality: 36.1 per 1,000

Adult literacy: 99.3 per cent

Two human rights defenders were released early from detention on humanitarian grounds but other prisoners of conscience continued to serve long prison sentences in conditions that amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Despite the introduction of new legislation to improve the treatment of detainees, dozens of reports of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners continued to emerge. Freedom of expression and association contracted ever further.

Freedom of expression – human rights defenders and journalists

The authorities continued to restrict freedom of expression and association.

In April, journalists were told that they were no longer allowed to meet with representatives of foreign organizations and foreign diplomats, or attend press conferences and seminars without prior written permission from the authorities. In July, a court in Tashkent sentenced the UK Embassy press secretary and Uzbekistani national, Leonid Kudryavtsev, to a large fine for "contravening the laws on organizations holding meetings, street protests and demonstrations". The prosecution had accused him of fostering extremism during training seminars for independent human rights activists on UK Embassy premises. An appeal court rejected Leonid Kudryavtsev's appeal against the verdict in August.

As in previous years, human rights defenders and independent journalists were subjected to harassment, beatings, detention and unfair trials. They were summoned for police questioning, placed under house arrest and routinely monitored by uniformed or plain-clothes officers. Some reported being beaten by police officers or by people suspected of working for the security forces.

The authorities released two human rights defenders early, but at least 10 others continued to serve long prison sentences in conditions that amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Many of those detained were critically ill without access to the necessary medical treatment; several continued to be subjected to torture as punishment for lodging complaints about their treatment or that of their fellow prisoners.

- On 14 October, human rights defender and prisoner of conscience Norboi Kholzhigitov, aged 61, was released early from prison on humanitarian grounds, just days before an official visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. His health had seriously deteriorated in the months before his release and his family feared he would die in prison. Norboi Kholzhigitov's colleague and co-defendant, Khabibulla Akpulatov, remained in prison. Following a visit in November, his son Yuldosh reported that his father's health and well-being had deteriorated since his last visit in July. Khabibulla Akpulatov's weight had dropped to below 50kg, he had lost sensation in both his legs and moved with difficulty. He only had six teeth left but was denied dental treatment. He appeared distressed and reluctant to speak about his treatment.

In June, the authorities closed the office of Human Rights Watch, the last international human rights organization remaining in the country. The Supreme Court granted a petition by the Ministry of Justice to close the office for the alleged repeated failure to comply with regulations, thereby forcing Human Rights Watch to stop its operations in the country.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Despite assertions by the authorities that the practice of torture had significantly decreased, and the introduction of new legislation to improve the treatment of detainees, dozens of reports of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners emerged throughout the year. In most cases, the authorities failed to conduct prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into these allegations.

In September, the President approved a new law on the treatment of individuals in pre-charge and pre-trial detention. The new legislation allowed, among other things, for an unrestricted number of visits of undefined length by detainees' relatives and lawyers and abolished the need to obtain prior permission from the investigating security officers. However, by the end of December there was scant evidence that the law was being implemented consistently and effectively.

Despite a handful of well-publicized releases, several thousand people convicted of involvement with banned Islamist parties or Islamic movements, as well as government critics, political opponents and human rights activists, continued to serve long prison terms under conditions that amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Many had their prison terms extended for allegedly violating prison rules of conduct following summary and closed trials held inside detention facilities.

- On 19 May, the poet and government critic Yusuf Juma was unexpectedly released from Yaslik prison after serving three years of a five-year sentence for resisting arrest and injuring police officers, charges he claimed were politically motivated. He was secretly taken to Tashkent Airport and put on a plane to the USA. Yusuf Juma said that he was forced to renounce his Uzbekistani citizenship in exchange for joining his family in the USA where they had been given political asylum. In an interview with Radio Ozodlyk (the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) he maintained that he had been tortured and otherwise ill-treated throughout his imprisonment, regularly spending 15 days in solitary confinement in punishment cells. He said that prison personnel and law enforcement officers used torture routinely to extract confessions from detainees or punish prisoners.

Counter-terrorism and security

The authorities continued to seek the extradition of members or suspected members of Islamic movements and Islamist groups and parties banned in Uzbekistan in the name of national and regional security and the fight against terrorism. Those forcibly returned to Uzbekistan were at serious risk of torture and other ill-treatment and long prison sentences in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions following unfair trials.

At least 12 of the 28 Uzbekistani men extradited from Kazakhstan in June (see Kazakhstan entry) were reported to have been put on trial on charges of religious extremism and alleged membership of the Jihadchilar (Jihadists) Islamist organization. All of the men were held incommunicado following their extradition. Human rights monitors believed they were detained in Tashkent prison and were at grave risk of torture. They also reported that relatives were intimidated by security forces and prevented from discovering the whereabouts of the men.

Three of those returned were sentenced to imprisonment in separate trials in August and September. Akhmad Boltaev and Faizullakhon Akbarov were given sentences of 15 and five years respectively by Sirdaria Regional Court on 21 August. The sentences were reduced on appeal to 13 and four years. They were found guilty of membership of Jihadchilar, distributing materials which threatened public order and planning to overthrow the constitutional order of Uzbekistan. Both had been held incommunicado for two months and were only allowed to meet their relatives after the trial. They were not given permission to hire their own lawyers and had only limited access to their state-appointed lawyers. On 13 September, Kibraisk District Criminal Court sentenced Kobidzhon Kurbanov to four years in prison for organizing illegal religious gatherings.

International scrutiny

The international community, in particular the EU and the US, took steps to increase economic and security co-operation with Uzbekistan, despite the continuing blatant human rights violations in the country.

President Karimov visited Brussels on 24 January for discussions on regional security and economic co-operation with the EU and NATO amid vocal protests by human rights organizations. It was his first official visit to Brussels since the May 2005 mass killings in Andizhan and the subsequent imposition of sanctions by the EU. European Council President Herman Van Rompuy declined to meet President Karimov for "ideological reasons". European Commission President José Manuel Barroso released a press statement which underlined that he had raised human rights issues with President Karimov during their meeting. Nevertheless, the EU continued to fail to take action to hold Uzbekistan to its human rights commitments.

Following further pledges by the President in September on economic, political and democratic reforms, the US Congress lifted its seven-year-old human rights restrictions on military assistance to Uzbekistan, to facilitate co-operation on transiting supplies to US and NATO troops in neighbouring Afghanistan.