

Amnesty International Report 2015/16 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Uzbekistan

The authorities used torture and other ill-treatment to suppress dissent, combat actual or perceived security threats, repress political opponents, extract confessions and incriminating information, and intimidate or punish detainees and prisoners and their families. Courts relied heavily on confessions extracted under torture, duress or deception. Prison sentences of individuals convicted of anti-state and terrorism offences were arbitrarily extended.

Background

In March, President Islam Karimov was re-elected for a fourth consecutive term in office, in an election that lacked genuine political competition.

Economic growth slowed down, affected by falling commodity prices in international markets. Remittances from Uzbekistani labour migrants abroad fell by over 45%. Over 2 million labour migrants were estimated to work in Russia alone.

The authorities claimed that the country was more vulnerable to attacks as a result of the resurgence of armed groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), amid reports of a tactical alliance between the IMU in Afghanistan and the armed group Islamic State (IS). The authorities intensified reprisals against perceived extremists, particularly among returning labour migrants, many of whom they suspected of having travelled to Syria to fight for IS.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Police and officers of the National Security Service (SNB) continued to routinely use torture and other ill-treatment to coerce suspects and detainees, including women and men charged with criminal offences such as theft, fraud or murder, into confessing to a crime or incriminating others. Detainees charged with anti-state and terrorism-related offences were particularly vulnerable to torture. Detainees were often tortured by people wearing masks.

Police and SNB officers regularly used convicted prisoners to commit torture and other ill-treatment on detainees in pre-trial detention. Under the Criminal Code, prisoners, unlike officials, could not be held responsible for torture but only for lesser crimes. A former detainee described witnessing officers and prisoners torture men and women in interrogation rooms in an SNB pre-trial detention centre, as well as in bathrooms and showers, punishment cells and purpose-built torture rooms with padded rubber walls and sound-proofing. He described SNB officers handcuffing detainees to radiators and breaking their bones with baseball bats.^{[1](#)}

Courts continued to rely heavily on confessions obtained under torture to hand down convictions. Judges routinely ignored or dismissed as unfounded defendants' allegations of torture or other ill-treatment, even when presented with credible evidence.

Two men, who were sentenced in 2014 to 10 years in prison each for alleged membership of a banned Islamist party, claimed in court that security forces had tortured them to sign false

confessions by burning their hands and feet against a stove. One defendant told the judge that security forces had pulled out his fingernails and toenails. The judge failed to inquire further into the torture allegations, and admitted the confessions as evidence.

At the UN Human Rights Committee examination of Uzbekistan's fourth periodic report in July, Uzbekistan rejected allegations of the pervasive use of torture and other ill-treatment by security forces and prison staff. Uzbekistan insisted that the constitutional prohibition of torture and single mention of it in the Criminal Procedure Code conformed to the state's obligations under the ICCPR. In its concluding observations, the Committee urged the authorities to "ensure that the prohibition of forced confessions and the inadmissibility of torture-tainted evidence are effectively enforced in practice by law enforcement officers and judges".

Prison conditions

The practice of arbitrarily extending prison terms even for minor alleged infractions of prison rules under Article 221 of the Criminal Code led to many prisoners, especially those convicted of anti-state offences, serving de facto life sentences. Azam Farmonov, a prisoner of conscience and human rights defender who was convicted in 2006 largely on the basis of coerced witness testimony, was due to be released at the end of April after serving a nine-year sentence at Jaslyk Prison. However, in May, following a blatantly unfair and closed trial without legal representation, a court extended his sentence for another five years for breaking prison rules, in particular for verbally mocking other prisoners and not wearing appropriate identification tags.² He told his wife during a prison visit in July that the prison authorities had kept him in a punishment cell for 10 days in March. They had handcuffed him and repeatedly tied a bag over his head to suffocate him. He was forced to listen to the screams of prisoners being tortured in adjoining cells.

Former parliamentarian Murad Dzhuraev, who was arrested in 1994, sentenced to 12 years in prison on politically motivated charges and had his sentence arbitrarily extended four times, was finally released on 12 November.

Counter-terror and security

The authorities became increasingly suspicious of labour migrants returning from abroad who may have had access to information on Islam which is censored or banned in Uzbekistan, resulting in an increased number of arrests and prosecutions for "extremism". The authorities claimed that migrant workers were targeted in Russia for recruitment by the IMU, IS or other groups characterized as extremist.

In November, security forces detained dozens of labour migrants who had returned from Russia and Turkey, in raids in the capital Tashkent and several regions of the country, amid disputed claims that they were members of the banned Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir and had links to IS members in Syria. Human rights defenders reported that security forces used torture to extract confessions from them.

Persecution of family members

The authorities routinely targeted relatives of individuals charged with or convicted of anti-state offences. In many cases, members of the same family were arbitrarily detained, tortured and otherwise ill-treated to force them to confess to fabricated charges, resulting in long prison sentences after unfair trials.

One woman reported how most of her male family members were serving long prison sentences after conviction of membership of a banned Islamist organization or had fled the country in fear for their lives. All had been tortured by security forces to “confess”. She was regularly called to the local police station, where she was detained and beaten to punish her for being a member of an “extremist family”, to reveal the whereabouts of male relatives or to incriminate them.

Former detainees and relatives of prisoners reported that *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees compiled confidential lists of potential “suspects” for the security forces, which led to arrests and harassment, including on the basis of planted evidence, as well as forced confessions.

Police also compiled files on members of unregistered religious communities, including information on their family members.

Freedom of expression – human rights defenders

Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly continued to be curtailed. In its concluding observations, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about “consistent reports of harassment, surveillance, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and ill-treatment by security forces and prosecutions on trumped-up charges of independent journalists, government critics, human rights defenders and other activists, in retaliation for their work”.

Police officers detained Elena Urlaeva, head of the independent NGO Human Rights Defenders’ Alliance of Uzbekistan, in the northeastern city of Chinaz on 31 May and subjected her to torture, including sexual violence, to force her to surrender the memory card from her camera. The memory card contained photographic evidence of the use of forced labour in cotton fields. Police officers beat her, called her a traitor and stripped her naked. Male police officers and a male paramedic held her by the arms and legs while a female doctor conducted intrusive body cavity examinations to find the memory card. Police officers then took her to a local hospital to do X-rays. When she asked to use the toilet, the officers forced her to urinate on the grass in front of the hospital. They filmed and photographed her, and threatened to post the pictures on the internet if she complained about her treatment.³ She was released without charge.

1. Secrets and lies: Forced confessions under torture in Uzbekistan ([EUR 62/1086/2015](#))
2. Uzbekistan: Five more years for "violating prison rules" ([EUR 62/1709/2015](#))

3. Uzbekistan: Defender subjected to sexual violence: Elena Urlaeva ([EUR 62/1799/2015](#)).