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The government's premature claims that Covid-19 transmission had ended, and tight control over information released, undermined measures to protect public health during the pandemic. Survivors of domestic violence continued to face challenges in accessing justice. Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread but under-reported. The government unduly restricted freedom of expression, sentencing opposition activists and government critics to lengthy prison terms on politically motivated charges.

Background

On 28 April, fighting broke out on a disputed section of the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, triggered by a dispute between local inhabitants on both sides over access to water. The Tajikistani authorities claimed that by the time the violence ceased on 1 May, 19 people had been killed and 87 injured on the Tajikistani side. In July the government announced its readiness to accept 100,000 refugees from Afghanistan. In August, media reported that 2,000 refugees from Afghanistan had passed through Tajikistan and all were resettled in third countries. In September the Minister of the Interior stated that Tajikistan did not have the infrastructure to host many refugees. A further 200 Afghan nationals tried to enter Tajikistan in September but only 100 women and children were admitted.

Right to health

The authorities tightly controlled the narrative around the Covid-19 pandemic, underplaying its real impact, which resulted in late and less effective measures to limit its spread and protect public health. On 26 January, the President told parliament that there were no more Covid-19 cases in Tajikistan. Media reports alleged pressure on medical workers not to diagnose the virus, and at least one doctor was reportedly fired after returning a positive test. On 21 June, the Prime Minister's office announced that some cases had been detected and blamed the public's failure to comply with protection measures.

Compulsory vaccination of all adults was introduced, but no information was given as to how it would be enforced. Over 4 million vaccine doses had been administered by the end of the year. In September, the government announced that there had been 17,000 cases of Covid-19 and 124 deaths since the start of the pandemic, but independent media claimed that the rates were much higher based on their own reporting.

Violence against women and girls

Survivors of domestic violence continued to face many challenges in accessing support, protection and justice. The 2013 law on domestic violence provides for survivors to report abuse to law enforcement officers but does not compel the relevant agencies to take appropriate steps to investigate complaints, issue protection orders and open a criminal case. A new draft of the Criminal Code, containing an article specifically criminalizing domestic violence, was discussed in parliament. It fails, however, to cover all types of violence notably psychological violence, marital rape and sexual assault.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In February, an Action Plan introduced as part of a new strategy to reform the criminal justice system came into force. It provides for independent monitoring of detention facilities, as well as improved complaint mechanisms for people in penitentiary institutions and the development of independent investigation mechanisms for deaths in custody.

Only a small number of torture and other ill-treatment cases continued to be reported to the authorities. In March the legal assistance group of the NGO Coalition against Torture reported that it had documented at least 38 cases of torture and other ill-treatment in the course of 2020, noting that this represented a fraction of the actual number of cases.

In June, three police officers were sentenced to between 10 and 13 years' imprisonment for the torture of Hasan Yodgorov in 2017. He "confessed" to a murder after being tortured with beatings and electric shocks for several days by police in Tursunzoda, western Tajikistan. He spent six months in pre-trial detention before the charges were dropped and he was released in May 2018, when another suspect was arrested. Hasan Yodgorov reported the torture the day after his release. Two of the police officers fell under amnesties and their sentences were shortened as a result.

Freedom of expression

The authorities continued to suppress opposition activists and government critics by sentencing them to lengthy prison terms on politically motivated charges, often requesting their extradition from countries of exile and harassing their relatives in Tajikistan and abroad.

On 13 January, Sadi Rakhmatov, the brother-in-law of Sharofiddin Gadoev, the deputy leader of the arbitrarily banned opposition movement Group 24, was released from prison in Greece after spending two months in detention because the Tajikistani authorities had placed him on an Interpol wanted list. Sadi Rakhmatov had been charged in Tajikistan with "facilitating mercenaries", a crime which carries a 15-year sentence.

On 25 March, independent lawyer and Chairman of the Tajik Centre in Moscow, Izzat Amon (also known as Izatullo Kholov), went missing. Two days later the Tajikistani Interior Ministry announced that he was in detention in the capital, Dushanbe, having been extradited from Russia. Izzat Amon had repeatedly criticized the Tajikistani government for failing to protect the rights of Tajikistani migrants in Russia. In October the Dushanbe City Court sentenced him to prison for nine years for fraud.

On 1 June, Mirzo Hojimuhammad, a former member of the arbitrarily banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was sentenced to five years in prison for "membership of a banned extremist organization". He had been working as a doctor in Russia for the past two years and returned to Tajikistan in February for a visit. He was first placed under travel restrictions and then arrested in May. His conviction was reportedly based on unspecified posts on social media. In 2020 he had delivered a media interview criticizing the authorities' late recognition of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In January, independent journalist Daler Sharipov was released on the expiry of his sentence. In April 2020, he had been found guilty of "inciting religious discord" and sentenced to one year's imprisonment for unofficially publishing and disseminating his dissertation on Islam.

In October, Buzurgmekhr Yorov's sentence was reduced by four years under an amnesty declared to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the country's independence. Buzurgmekhr Yorov, a lawyer, was sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment for having represented several members of the banned IRPT.

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