

Questions asked over second outbreak of serious violence in six months.

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*Prison № 3/2 in Vakhdat city of Tajikistan. (Photo: RFE/RL's Tajik service)*

Another deadly riot in one of Tajikistan's largest prisons has again highlighted what experts say are serious flaws in the country's entire penal system.

Officials said that 32 people, including three prison officers, were killed as a result of the riot that began at 9.30am on May 19 in the Kirpichny facility in Vakhdat, near Dushanbe.

It was the second prison riot in the last six months, and the authorities once again blamed Islamic radicals within the 1,500 capacity facility for the violence. The Prosecutor General's Office reported that a criminal investigation had been opened into the riot.

According to a prison service statement, the riot was organised by 30 inmates affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) movement.

A group of inmates "armed with knives and other bladed articles took three guards hostage, killed them and tried to fight their way out," the statement continued, adding that "strict measures" were taken to stop the riot.

The authorities subsequently said that the instigator had been Bekhruz Gulmurod, the son of fugitive special police unit colonel Gulmurod Khalimov who joined Islamic State in 2015. They reported that among those killed were Said Kiyomiddin and Makhsumi Sattor, both senior activists with the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan – Tajikistan’s largest political movement, banned for extremism in 2014 – as well as prominent Sufi cleric Saidmahdikhon Sattorov.

Sattor’s son Abdurakhim told Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Liberty, that during their last meeting his father had mentioned disputes with the followers of various groups within the facility.

According to former inmates, prisoners in Tajikistan are divided into so-called hizbs, a nickname derived from the title of the banned Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir group, and secular “laymen”.

The groups are kept together but treated very differently by prison staff.

“Prison guards have taken complete control of the hizbs and mistreat them,” said a former Vakhdat inmate, who was released three months ago and asked to remain anonymous.

“They punish them for every single mistake they make. This kind of inequality often leads to restlessness.”

He added that keeping hizbs and laymen together served to fuel the occasional conflicts that broke out between the two groups.

According to official data, there are nearly 12,000 inmates currently serving time in Tajik jails and such disturbances are not unusual, although rarely on such a large scale.

The most recent other outbreak of serious violence was in November 2018, when a riot in the Khujand prison led to 23 deaths, according to official data, although some media outlets reported more victims.

Experts said that both the Khujand and Vakhdat riots could have been resolved far more peacefully.

Human rights activist Oinikhol Bobonazarova said that international best practice was for the authorities to launch negotiations, sometimes lasting for many hours, to end prison riots without fatalities.

But she claimed that the authorities had not attempted to negotiate at all in either of the two recent riots, in which a total of at least 55 people were killed.

“Why do they solve the issue within an hour? Why don’t they hold negotiations for five to six hours or a day?” she asked.

Bobonazarova said that the fact that prisoners rioted in Vakhdat despite being aware of the force with which the Khujand prison riot was suppressed raised questions about their experiences in the jail. Conditions in Tajikistan’s prisons, which include torture and corruption, have been repeatedly criticised by media and civil society groups.

“The question is, why people decide to riot even if they know the authorities would not

negotiate with them and even if they manage to flee, they would be caught or killed?” she continued. “There might be other reasons for that. When a person has nothing to lose... they could start an open confrontation.”

After the Khujand riot, President Emomali Rakhmon replaced the prison system’s entire leadership.

He appointed Mansurjon Umarov, previously first deputy chairman of the state committee for national security, as head of the state department of corrections. Umarov has been outspoken about his plans to improve conditions.

Makhmurod Odinayev, a chair of the committee for prisoners’ rights protection, said that he believed Umarov was trying to put new plans in place. Nonetheless, systemic problems remained, and he warned that it was entirely possible that there would be a repeat of the recent violence in the near future.

“With Mansurjon Umarov taking the position of the head of the Prison Service, positive changes happened in this sphere,” he continued. “However, some employees do not want to get rid of their old habits. Abuse and harassment of the inmates and even swearing at their friends may provoke them to stand up against the prison staff.”

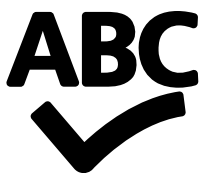
Odinayev, an activist on prisoners’ rights for more than a decade, said the number of complaints of mistreatment had increased in recent years.

The priority was now to allow prison inspection by independent monitoring groups, he stressed. There have been some organised visits in which inmates - in the presence of their guards - told journalists that conditions were good, but the government currently refuses to allow NGOs or even the Red Cross to inspect its prisons.

“If there is neither torture nor violence [in prisons], then why are the prison gates closed to civil society?” Odinayev asked.

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*This publication was produced under IWPR project «Forging links and raising voices to combat radicalization in Central Asia»*



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