

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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(Paris) The [Uzbek](#) government should free everyone imprisoned on politically motivated charges under its Constitution Day amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia said today. The authorities should also carry out an effective investigation into the September 2014 death in custody of Nilufar Rahimjonova, a 37-year-old woman imprisoned on politically motivated charges, the groups said.

The Uzbek government has imprisoned thousands of people on politically motivated charges, including human rights and opposition activists, journalists, religious believers, artists, and other perceived critics. Some are in serious ill-health or have been tortured, and sentences for some were arbitrarily extended while they were in prison.

The Uzbek government has imprisoned and tortured some of the worlds longest-held political activists, independent journalists, and other peaceful figures, said [Steve Swerdlow](#), Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. The Uzbek government should use this opportunity to free all those who were wrongfully imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of basic rights, as well as those whose sentences have been arbitrarily extended.

Constitution Day Amnesty

Following Constitution Day on December 7, Uzbek authorities announced an amnesty, potentially applicable to thousands of prisoners, over the next several months. As in past years, this years amnesty applies to those convicted of less serious offenses and to specific demographic categories such as women and prisoners over 60. But those imprisoned on politically motivated charges are rarely released even when they meet the criteria. Even if they are released, however, the amnestys terms leave the original unlawful convictions intact.

In a recent [report](#), Human Rights Watch documented that Uzbek authorities have used violations of prison rules as a pretext to add years to the sentences of at least 14 of 44 people convicted on politically motivated charges in recent years, and have used the same pretext widely in the cases of many others imprisoned on charges relating to religious extremism. Such violations are often very minor, such as possessing unauthorized nail clippers, saying prayers, and wearing a white shirt.

Some of those wrongfully imprisoned, such as Muhammad Bekjanov, Akram Yuldashev, Murod Juraev, and Solijon Abdurakhmanov, are elderly or in ill-health, said Nadejda Atayeva, president of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia. The Uzbek government should widely apply its amnesty program so that they wont lose even one more day behind bars.

Among those imprisoned for no reason other than peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression are 14 human rights activists: Azam Farmonov, Mehriniso Hamdamova, Zulhumor Hamdamova, Isroiljon Kholdorov, Gaybullo Jalilov, Nuraddin Jumaniyazov, Matluba Kamilova, Ganikhon Mamatkhanov, Chuyan Mamatkulov, Zafarjon Rahimov, Yuldash Rasulov, Bobomurod Razzokov, Fahriddin Tillaev, and Akzam Turgunov.

Five more are journalists: Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Muhammad Bekjanov, Gayrat Mikhliboev, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, and Dilmurod Saidov. Four are opposition activists: Murod Juraev, Samandar Kukanov, Kudratbek Rasulov, and Rustam Usmanov. Three are independent religious figures: Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, Hayrullo Hamidov, and Akram Yuldashev.

Six others are perceived to be government critics, including Botirbek Eshkuziev, Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Erkin Musaev, Davron Tojiev, and Ravshanbek Vafoev, and one, Dilorom Abdukodirova, was a witness to the May 13, 2005 Andijan massacre, when Uzbek government forces shot and killed hundreds of mainly peaceful protesters.

Uzbek authorities should order an immediate investigation of all allegations of mistreatment of prisoners held on politically motivated charges, allow for re-examination of the closed hearings in which political prisoners sentences have been extended, and grant all

prisoners access to necessary medical care and family visits to which they are entitled under international human rights law, the human rights groups said.

Death in Custody of Nilufar Rahimjonova

Rahimjonova died on September 12, 2014, in the Zangiota womens prison colony outside Tashkent. She had served almost 3 years of a 10-year sentence. The apparently trumped-up charges against her illegal border crossing and espionage appeared to have been brought on the basis of her relationship to her father, Domullo Istaravshani, a well-known theologian, based in Tajikistan, and her husband, Sayidyunus Burkhanov, more commonly known as Sayidyunus Istaravshani, based in Iran.

Both are independent religious figures who have openly criticized the restrictions President Islam Karimov began placing on religious worship and the practice of Islam in Uzbekistan in the early 1990s.

Rahimjonovas husband told Human Rights Watch that following her arrest in December 2011 in Tashkent, Rahimjonova was forced to give a TV interview in which she accused him and her father of being connected to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an organization designated as a terrorist organization by various states, including the United States, and other extremist groups. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison following a flawed trial, allegations of ill-treatment, and lack of access to counsel.

Istaravshani told Human Rights Watch that his wife did not suffer chronic illnesses or complain about her health. A close relative in Tashkent had visited her just two months before she died, and said there were no indications she was in poor health. Officials have not given the family a cause of death although, approximately one month after the death, Uzbek authorities handed a lawyer hired by the family a death certificate that stated Rahimjonova had hung herself.

Uzbek authorities delivered Rahimjonovas body to her brothers home in Tashkent. Istaravshani said her brother was ordered to bury the body now, leaving no opportunity to conduct a post-mortem examination.

When people are deprived of their liberty, responsibility for their fate rests with the detaining authorities, who must guarantee the life and physical integrity of each detainee. International human rights law requires governments to ensure effective investigations into deaths in custody regardless of the presumed cause. Such investigations are essential for ascertaining the cause of death, identifying anyone responsible for the death, and holding them to account. These investigations also deter similar incidents in the future, ensure the security of other prisoners, and provide confidence in the authorities commitment to fulfilling their national and international obligations.

The next of kin also have a right to be informed of all the circumstances of the death, and to have access to an effective remedy if the death is the result of state culpability.

My wife was in good health before she died and had four children to live for, Istaravshani told Human Rights Watch. What now can I do for my wife? All I can do now is to ensure that no other wives like her will have to die in prison and see to it that no one is locked up in Uzbekistans prisons without proof of actual wrongdoing.

Deaths under circumstances such as Rahimjonovas are highly suspicious and need to be thoroughly and independently investigated, Swerdlow said. The Uzbek government should ensure that full and open investigations are conducted into all prison deaths and allow for regular, unfettered, independent, expert monitoring of prison conditions to help prevent such deaths in the future.

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