

Human Rights Watch

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

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Police Detain, Beat Rights Advocates Scheduled to Meet Opposition Leaders

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(New York) - Uzbek authorities should immediately stop their new harassment campaign against political activists and human rights defenders, Human Rights Watch said today. Since November 7, 2009, local authorities in six locations have detained at least seven activists and beaten three of them, one of whom sought hospital treatment.

The activists were scheduled to meet with Bahodir Choriev, leader of the Birdamlik opposition movement, who returned to Uzbekistan in October from exile in the United States, and Diloram Iskhakova, another prominent Birdamlik leader. The campaign apparently was intended to keep the activists from meeting with Choriev and Iskhakova.

"What happened this week is the latest effort to silence people who speak out for human rights and to prevent any kind of political activism," said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "This treatment needs to stop."

Harassment, Beatings in Jizzakh

The latest series of moves, apparently intended to harass and intimidate activists, began on November 9 in the city of Jizzakh, two days before Iskhakov and Choriev arrived.

Police detained Bakhtior Khamroev, chair of the Jizzakh regional branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), for about four hours and released him after the chief of police, who supposedly wanted to speak to him, did not appear.

Saida Kurbanova, chair of the group's Pakhtakor district branch, was detained for about six hours the same day at another district police station and told the same story. Khamroev reported that police also went to the home of Mamir Azimov, chairperson of the Jizzakh district branch, but left when they saw he was ill.

The next day, a local police officer appeared at the home of Uktam Pardaev, the chairman of Jizzakh District Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (IHRSU), saying he had come to invite Pardaev to tea. The officer made Pardaev sit in a caf with him until evening. When Pardaev asked the officer why they were meeting, he reportedly said, "We are just sitting here."

Pardaev told Human Rights Watch that he had a similar visit from a police major on November 11. When Pardaev asked why he was being detained, he said, the police major reportedly responded, "I don't know, let's just go somewhere." Pardaev was held for more than six hours.

Kurbanova had another visit from a police officer on the morning of November 11, but was not taken into custody, reportedly because she was ill. Khamroev received two phone calls that morning from police asking about his health and then a visit at home from a man in plainclothes who refused to identify himself. The man, whom Khamroev believes to be a police officer, returned to his car and, with two other men, sat outside Khamroev's home for several hours. Khamroev said his house continued to be under police surveillance throughout the rest of the day.

Azimov told Human Rights Watch that two police officers detained him for several hours on the morning of November 11, but permitted him to go home for lunch on the condition that he would return to the station afterwards.

At about 2 p.m. Khamroev, Azimov, Iskhakova, and Choriev met at a caf. Azimov told Human Rights Watch that he barely had time to greet Choriev before he received a phone call from a police officer, asking him to come out to the street. Two officers drove up, seized his phone, and took him back to the police station, where he was severely beaten and held for the rest of the afternoon.

Choriev, Iskhakova, and Khamroev continued to talk and later moved into Choriev's car. After a half hour, a plainclothes officer came up to the car and said that they needed to move along. Khamroev said the officer tried to pull him out of the back seat and then punched Khamroev several times in the face. Iskhakova told Human Rights Watch that when Choriev got out of the car another man in plainclothes punched him. She said the men insulted and swore at her. The officers demanded that they come down to the police station. Choriev reportedly agreed that they would follow in his own car but did not go.

Azimov told Human Rights Watch that when police took him to the station, they demanded to know why he was meeting with Choriev, then beat him repeatedly, punching him all over his body, particularly his kidneys, and slapping his head. Police also made Azimov stand with his legs shoulder-width apart and hold a chair over his head for about an hour, threatening to continue beating him if he lowered it. Azimov said his head was spinning after the beatings he sustained and that he struggled to hold the chair up.

Before releasing Azimov, a police official warned him not to seek medical help at a hospital and threatened to have Azimov's arms and legs broken if he reported what had happened.

Azimov was released around 6 p.m. and drove himself home. A short while later, he went to a hospital, was seen by a doctor, and then discharged. He told Human Rights Watch he was still in great pain.

Earlier on November 11, on their way to Jizzakh, Choriev and Iskhakova tried to meet with Karim Bozorboev, a civic activist in Sirdaryo, but he was summoned to the city prosecutor's office about 15 minutes after he had spoken by phone with Iskhakova. Bozorboev told Human Rights Watch that he was released around 5:30 p.m. after he was questioned by an investigator, including about his affiliation with Birdamlik.

Detentions in Fergana Valley

On November 7 and 8, Choriev and Iskhakova went to Ferghana, Andijan, and Namangan-cities in the Ferghana Valley-where people with whom they hoped to meet were similarly detained to prevent the meetings. Iskhakova said that two cars with Tashkent license plates followed her and Choriev the entire trip.

Akhad Nabiev, leader of the Ferghana regional branch of Birdamlik, was reportedly detained on November 7 by National Security Agency (SNB) agents. Iskhakova told Human Rights Watch that the next day, after she and Choriev had left town, she received a phone call from Nabiev, who told her that he had been released.

On November 8, Choriev and Iskhakova tried to meet in Andijan with Abdukadyr Sattarov, the leader of the Andijan Regional Branch of the Birdamlik Movement, but he did not appear, was not home, and his cell phones were switched off.

Choriev and Iskhakova also tried to meet with Saidjahon Zainabitdinov, a long-term human rights defender and former political prisoner. Iskhakova said Zainabitdinov told her by phone that he was on his way to their meeting, but he never arrived and did not answer his mobile phone. She tried his house, but his son reportedly told her that his father had already left to meet them.

In Namangan, Iskhakova and Choriev had hoped to meet Nosir Zakirov, a journalist and former political prisoner who worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Zakirov told Human Rights Watch that about 10 men in plainclothes surrounded him at the caf where he had met his friend late that morning. He told Human Rights Watch that he knew if he tried to leave that there would be problems for him as well as for Choriev and Iskhakova, so he waited there for about two hours before he went home.

"It is shocking that the authorities can get away with such blatant persecution of human rights and political activists," said Cartner. "It seems quite clear that the detention, beatings, and harassment are intended to frighten and punish them."

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