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

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Most Uzbekistanis know it as the [House of Torture](#) or the Place of No Return. Uzbekistan, already notorious for its deplorable prison conditions and abuse of prisoners, has one prison that stands out more gruesome and horrific than the rest: Jaslyk Prison. Its prisoners, at least those lucky enough to live to tell their tales, have described the myriad methods of torture used at the prison, including sexual assault, needles forced under prisoners fingernails, electric shock, and long periods of isolation in solitary confinement without food or drink.

The stories that escape the walls of Jaslyk Prison are not for the faint of heart. Jaslyk was opened in 1999 following deadly bombings in Tashkent, and currently holds 5,000 to 7,000 inmates. The prison is located on the site of a former Soviet-era chemical-weapons testing area in the harsh northwest region of the country. Despite its isolated location and official silence about its existence, the stories of its inner workings were too horrific to stay secret for long. In 2002, human rights groups documented two suspicious deaths of prisoners from Jaslyk, whose bodies both exhibited clear signs of torture by submersion in boiling water.

Since those first reports, released prisoners and family members of deceased prisoners have begun to share their own horrific tales of the inhuman treatment within Jaslyks walls. Yusuf Juma, an Uzbekistani poet, spent three years at Jaslyk after challenging President Islam Karimov's right to run for a new term in 2007. Juma describes Jaslyk as nothing less than a death camp. It feels like there is no limit to the cruelty the prison officers there are capable of. During Juma's time in Jaslyk, he spent 15 days a month in solitary confinement. For the rest of the time, Juma would be transferred to a different facility in small iron box, which was too small to sit, too small to stand up. And it was a bumpy road and my head would bang against iron. There wasn't enough air to breathe. As shocking as Juma's story is, his treatment seems to be commonplace among those relegated to the country's worst prison. He observes, I don't know which is worse Jaslyk or Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

Jaslyk has recently come to the world's attention because of Valeriy Parijer, a businessman of dual Russian-Israeli citizenship who served a 10-year sentence in the Uzbekistani prison system starting in 2002. As his original prison sentence was about to expire, Uzbekistani officials recently sentenced him to an additional five-year term for breaking prison rules, and he was transferred to Jaslyk. Parijer's wife describes his experience as horrendous suffering and recounts episodes where prison officials put needles under his fingernails and left him in an iron box for hours in the extreme summer heat. Parijer's story has prompted the Israeli government to demand he be transferred to another prison immediately, and to call for his release.

Although Uzbekistan's constitution and laws officially prohibit the kind of torture and inhuman treatment experienced by both Juma and Parijer, it is obvious that torture runs rampant within the country's prisons, and perpetrators are operating with complete impunity. Despite Uzbekistan's assurance that its prison conditions have improved over the years, the country still refuses to allow UN officials to visit its prisons, including the notorious Jaslyk facility. The UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concerns in a [March 2010 publication](#) where it found that the definition of torture in Uzbekistan's criminal code was not in conformity with the UN Convention Against Torture.

The prevalence of torture within Jaslyk Prison illuminates the general culture of impunity that has plagued the entire Uzbekistani justice system, where people in police or penal custody are subject to cruel and inhuman treatment from the time of arrest to pre-trial detention to final sentencing. This cycle cannot be broken until torture crimes are thoroughly investigated, documented, and prosecuted.

Convictions of perpetrators are hard to obtain, however, when torture victims lack hard evidence to prove their claims of abuse. Eyewitness accounts (other than the victims) are rare, and torturers have become diabolically clever with their torture methods; many have adopted techniques that maximize pain while minimizing scarring so that victims have little evidence to show judges and prosecutors. But even after months and years have gone by, specially trained health professionals are often able to identify and interpret the scars left on victims' minds and bodies. The findings of such forensic medical investigation are then summarized in medical-legal affidavits and presented as evidence in torture prosecutions. This objective medical documentation serves as a critical and irrefutable source of evidence that prosecutors can use to break the cycle of impunity that has tormented Uzbekistan's people for years.

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