



Covid-19 in Central Asia: no alibi to violate human rights

News release

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Geneva (OMCT) - A new briefing by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) uncovers how governments in Central Asia have stepped up harassment of human rights defenders, opposition activists and independent journalists in the wake of the pandemic. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan already had a less than glowing human rights record. Authorities employ a sophisticated arsenal of repressive measures to muzzle those who seek to inform themselves and others or who aim to disclose officials' shortcomings in handling the ongoing public health crisis.

Authorities in **Kazakhstan** arrested dozens of activists on frivolous charges of spreading false information about Covid-19 or obstructing police and adopted a new law on public assemblies that virtually outlaws any protest without official permission. According to a deputy minister in **Uzbekistan**, an order to seize mobile phones from people placed in quarantine centres was needed to stop complaints about poor living conditions. People who flouted the curfew in **Kyrgyzstan** were routinely kept in overcrowded police cells overnight, exposing them to an unnecessary risk of infection.

The official number of confirmed cases and mortality rate sound too good to be true. For more than a month, ministers in **Tajikistan** refused to acknowledge the coronavirus was to blame for an epidemic bout of pneumonia and subsequently blocked a website showing an unofficial death tally. Officials in **Turkmenistan** remain ebullient about their success in keeping the country free of Covid-19 by drinking herbal tea and burning dried plants from the desert. Finally, all five former Soviet "-stans" continue to ignore the recommendation of UN experts to substantially reduce the numbers of their prisoners, who cannot socially distance and are often kept in unsanitary conditions.

The briefing concludes that by limiting the spread of human rights, Central Asian leaders might boost their immunity from criticism in the short run, but dismally fail to shield their subjects from the coronavirus.

*The first part of the briefing **How Central Asian States are muzzling dissent to stop the spread of news about Covid-19** can be accessed [here](#) and the second part [here](#).*

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) is the largest global NGO group actively standing up to torture and protecting human rights defenders worldwide. It has more than 200 members in 90 countries. Its international Secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

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