

NGOs call on the Tajikistani authorities to respect international law in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO)

The Tajikistani authorities should swiftly **end the violent crackdown and persecution of protestors in GBAO; allow urgent access** to GBAO's western-central Rushan District **for international humanitarian and human rights organizations**; and **reestablish internet and mobile phone connections** to the region as a matter of priority, Civil Rights Defenders, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights Poland (HFHR), International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) and Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (OMCT) urged.

Tensions in GBAO have run high since 14 May 2022, when protestors gathered in the region's capital Khorog and announced that they would start an indefinite protest starting on 16 May, unless Alisher Mirzonabot, the regional leader, resigned and an effective investigation was conducted into the killing of Gulbidin Ziyobekov by police in November last year (see background below).¹ On 16 May, several hundred people gathered in Khorog city centre and military and special forces reportedly violently dispersed the protest in an operation which left at least one person dead and several wounded.²

The authorities also cut off internet to the entire GBAO region on 16 May. Attacks by security forces on civilians, many of them peaceful, continued on 17 and 18 May, with the reported use of tear gas grenades and live munition.

The violence has spread to other areas of GBAO, and Rushan District in particular, where local residents attempted to block the road to Khorog with their cars in order to prevent a military convoy from passing. On 18 May, the Tajikistani Interior Ministry announced it would carry out an "anti-terror operation" in Rushan, where mobile, landline and internet communications have been cut, and people have been denied the right to leave or enter. Local witnesses report that snipers and military helicopters were used to fire live munitions at civilians. Clashes between security forces and demonstrators resulted in casualties on both sides.

Posts on social media based on eyewitness reports indicate that security forces searched houses in Rushan District, checked and seized mobile phones, detained residents, and allegedly tortured some of them to death or performed deliberate extra-judicial executions.³ At least 25 protestors are estimated to have been killed at the hands of security forces in and around Rushan on 18 and 19 May.^{4 5}

The Ministry of Interior, however, stated that nine people were killed including one member of the security forces, that 24 people were injured, and over 120 people detained (whom the Ministry refers to as "militants" and "members of a terrorist group").⁶ State-run media continues to allege that a so-called "anti-terror operation against heavily armed assailants" was carried out and has broadcast pictures of the

¹ <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-crisis-gripped-government-opts-to-pick-deadly-fight-in-the-pamirs>

² <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-at-least-one-killed-in-pamirs-unrest>

³ On 19 May 2022, Pamir Daily News, referring to four sources from Vomar, reported that several residents of Vomar had been detained at their homes (probably on 18 May 2022) but had been found dead with fatal bullet wounds at the temples that morning: <https://t.me/pamirdailynews/733>.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/19/twenty-five-ethnic-pamiris-killed-by-security-forces-gorno-badakhshan-tajikistan-protests>

⁵ (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/tajikistan-un-expert-fears-crackdown-against-pamiri-minority-could-spiral>).

⁶ <https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34085-khabari-markazi-matbuoti-vkd-t-2>

corpses of Rushan residents next to weapons.⁷ According to independent news sources, one of the latest victims was Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, an influential local leader, who was shot dead by government troops on 22 May.⁸ On the same day, the Ministry of the Interior announced in a press release that the "leader of an organised crime group" had died "as a result of internal squabbles of criminal groups" in a shootout.⁹

Pressure on local mass media and arrest of journalist and human rights activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva

Against this backdrop, the Tajikistani authorities have stepped up intimidation of independent media and civil society. *Asia Plus*, one of the few remaining independent media outlets in Tajikistan, on 17 May that it had been forced to cease covering the events in GBAO after receiving threats of closure from the Prosecutor General's Office because of what it alleged to be "one-sided" reporting on GBAO.¹⁰

Also on 17 May, the Ministry of the Interior posted a statement on its website, attempting to incriminate Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, a prominent representative of the Pamiri minority, independent journalist and civil society activist, alleging that she was responsible for organising unrest in Khorog.¹¹ Later that day journalists from *Radio Ozodi* and *Current Times* (both services of *RFE/RL* in Tajikistan) were violently attacked by unidentified men wearing civilian clothes near Mamadshoeva's home in Dushanbe, after they had interviewed her. The men forcibly confiscated the journalists' cameras and phones containing the recorded interviews with Mamadshoeva.¹²

Mamadshoeva requested legal assistance from the NGO Coalition against Torture and Impunity but on 18 May officers of the State Committee for State Security (SCNS) detained her, searched the apartment where she was staying with her daughter and confiscated her laptop and mobile phone. On 19 May, Mamadshoeva was charged with the criminal offence of publicly calling for violent change of the constitutional order (Article 307, part 2 of the Criminal Code).¹³

Background

On 25 November 2021, protests broke out in the city of Khorog after security forces fatally wounded Gulbidin Ziyobekov, a young man from the village of Tavdem in GBAO's Roshtkala District while detaining him on suspicion of kidnapping. Two other men were reportedly shot and wounded as Ziyobekov was detained. On the same day, relatives and protesters carried his body to the main square, demanding an investigation into the incident. The crowd of protesters grew quickly, calling for the withdrawal of the military stationed in Khorog, the dismantling of military checkpoints in the city, and the removal of the newly appointed Governor Alisher Mirzonabot. Two protestors – Tutisho Amirshoev and Gulnazar Murodbekov – were killed, and several others were injured by shots which were reportedly fired into the crowd by security forces. Members of the security forces were reportedly injured by violent protesters. The violent mass protests continued for several days, and the central governmental authorities

⁷ <https://khovar.tj/2022/05/markazi-matbuoti-vazorati-kor-oi-dohilii-um-urii-to-ikiston-habar-medi-ad/>.

⁸ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31862351.html>, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-local-residents-say-pamiri-leader-killed-by-government-troops>

⁹ <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/zayavlenie-press-tsentra-upravleniya-ministerstva-vnutrennih-del-po-gbao/>

¹⁰ <http://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/20220517/zayavlenie-redaktsii-aziya-plyus-o-situatsii-v-gbao>

¹¹ <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-at-least-one-killed-in-pamirs-unrest>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-protest-khorugh-badakhstan/31854157.html>, <https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34065-vazorati-kor-oi-dokhil-khabar-medi-ad-2>

¹² <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/v-dushanbe-napali-na-s-yemochnuyu-gruppu-nastoyashchego-vremeni/31854850.html>

¹³ <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31858434.html>

immediately blocked the internet connection in GBAO for four months until 21 March 2022 – depriving the population of the region of their right to access information.¹⁴

By joint decision of the local authorities and representatives of the protesters, a group of 44 representatives of civil society and government bodies, called Commission 44, was formed to investigate the events of 25-28 November 2021 in Khorog and the Roshtkala District. Several members of this group also joined the Investigation Team set up by the Prosecutor General’s Office to conduct a joint investigation into Ziyobekov’s death, and the use of firearms against demonstrators resulting in the deaths of Tutisho Amirshoev and Gulnazar Murobbekov and 17 wounded in Khorog. Commission 44 representatives have repeatedly criticized the authorities for obstructing a thorough and transparent joint investigation. In early February 2022, the Prosecutor of GBAO announced during a meeting broadcasted on local TV that the criminal investigation into the use of firearms by law enforcement agencies against protesters in Khorog in November 2021 had been closed due to “lack of elements of a crime in the actions of law enforcement agencies”. Mass arrests, trials and repression against local residents continued.¹⁵ Criminal cases were initiated against many protesters who were sentenced in unfair trials to prison terms for alleged attacks on state officials, hooliganism, illegal possession of arms and cutting trees during the protests.¹⁶ Reportedly, in violation of procedural requirements, in many cases the verdicts were prepared before court hearings took place, and the hearings lasted no longer than two to four hours before the judge announced the verdict. According to human rights defenders, in all these cases those arrested did not have access to a lawyer, some were held *incommunicado*, and severely beaten in custody.

There are also concerns around the forcible return to Tajikistan of people originating from GBAO, whom the authorities regard as leading supporters of the protests. Among those returned, arrested and sentenced to prison terms are popular blogger and Mixed Martial Arts fighter, Chorshanbe Chorshanбиеv, and Amriddin Alovatshoyev.¹⁷

The authorities have also conducted a concerted media smear campaigns against local residents. Since November 2021, the local TV Station *Badakhshon* has been instrumentalized by local authorities to discredit local unofficial leaders and residents who they claim were involved in the protests.

Local citizens (often minor public officials, teachers, doctors, students) have been coerced by security forces to make statements in support of the authorities denouncing the protests and local activists. *Badakhshon* daily news regularly covers the detention of local residents and shows detainees making televised confessions. The TV anchor refers to them as “criminals” even though they are only under preliminary investigation, mentioning their names and even their places of residence.

We call on the Tajikistani authorities to:

- **Cease the violent crackdown and persecution of peaceful protesters** and to exercise restraint by upholding their international human rights obligations.
- Urgently **allow international humanitarian and human rights organizations**, especially the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to access Rushan to monitor the situation.
- Facilitate dialogue for a resolution based on **respect for human rights**.

¹⁴ See IPHR’s joint Civic Solidarity Initiative (CSI) statement https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/final_26_01_22_Statement-Violation-of-right-to-information-ENG.pdf

¹⁵ https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20211225/segodnya-mesyats-sobitiyam-v-horoge-chto-izmenilos-i-chto-budet-dalshe?tg_rhash=dad9b8f651f186. In a later ASIA-Plus article, Ziyobekov’s mother informed the public that criminal proceedings against her other son, various relatives and other people from her village had been initiated: <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/incidents/20220118/the-people-are-not-to-blame-for-feeling-my-pain-says-gulbiddins-mother>.

¹⁶ <https://cabar.asia/en/?p=51099>

¹⁷ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31827062.html>, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31848493.html>

- Immediately **re-establish internet and mobile phone connection** in the region and ensure that the local population has access to other sources of information to complement the information broadcast on state television channels.
- Reopen the road to Rushan, keep the transport routes open to the whole region, and make every effort to **stop a humanitarian crisis from unfolding** there by providing goods and medical care for the population.
- Ensure that all those detained in connection with allegations of illegal activities during the protests are allowed **access to a lawyer** of their own choice and to meet them regularly and confidentially.
- Urgently, effectively and thoroughly investigate the attack on **journalists of Radio Ozodi and Current time** and bring those responsible to justice.
- Immediately and unconditionally release human rights defender **Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva** and drop the charges against her.
- Urgently, effectively and thoroughly **investigate the use of force** and the circumstances leading to deaths and injuries among civilians during the events of November 2021 and May 2022 and make the findings public.
- **Recognising those who died or sustained injuries** during the November 2021 and May 2022 events **as victims**, so that lawyers from the Civil society Anti-Torture Coalition can take up their cases.