

19 February 2025

UZBEKISTAN: Torturers' impunity "is mockery not justice"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Officials of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 repeatedly tortured Muslim prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov. Prison officer Davr Sottiyev severely beat him and pledged to "give Astanov an injection which will soon kill him", a local Muslim told Forum 18. Despite complaints, the regime has taken no action against the suspect torturers. In January 2025 the Prison Governor called relatives with an implied threat of punishment if they lodge complaints. The Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, General Prosecutor's Office, and Ombudsperson's Office refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Officials of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 repeatedly tortured Muslim prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov during 2023 and 2024, including threatening him with death. On one occasion, prison officer Davr Sottiyev severely beat Astanov and told him that before he leaves, "he [Sottiyev] will give Astanov an injection which will soon kill him", a local Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. As a result of Sottiyev's severe physical torture, prisoner of conscience Astanov was placed in the prison medical unit.

Prisoner of conscience Astanov, who is now 53, made multiple complaints about the torture he experienced to the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the Ombudsperson. Against the regime's legally-binding human rights obligations, officials have taken no action against prison officer Sottiyev or other suspect torturers. The regime's only response was to send an alleged forensic medical "expert" to examine Astanov and then claimed there were "no traces of wounds or bruises". The Muslim commented: "This is mockery not justice" (see below).

In January 2025, Prison Governor Farrukh Ismatov, head of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1, called relatives of prisoner of conscience Astanov. He claimed to them that Astanov is fine and that they have no need to complain to the authorities about his situation. The relatives understood that they were being threatened with punishment if they lodge complaints (see below).

Various officials of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the regime-appointed Human Rights Commissioner or Ombudsperson's Office have refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the multiple cases of torture inflicted on prisoner of conscience Astanov (see below).

The regime tries to stop its Muslim prisoners from praying the namaz, and frequently tortures those who do meet other Muslims for prayer. If prison authorities detect groups of Muslims praying together, they will put them in punishment cells for several days, Muslims who Forum 18 has talked to from October 2024 onwards have stated. Prison authorities may not detect or punish individual prisoners praying the namaz alone (see below).

Officials are preparing to add a further prison term to that of 30-year-old prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov. A Tashkent court jailed him in November 2020 along with six other prisoners of conscience for between 11 and four years. Their "crime" was to meet in Tashkent to discuss Islam. On 5 December 2023, a court in Tashkent Region added 10 years to his existing 11 year prison term. His "crime" was to be three minutes late for a prison roll call. In November 2024, Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department opened a new criminal case against him (see forthcoming F18News article).

From summer 2024, the regime has apparently implemented a policy of putting Muslim prisoners of conscience in a punishment cell for several days each to prevent them being eligible for early conditional release, or to make it easier to transfer them to a harsher-regime prison. Prisoners of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov and Alimardon Sultonov are among those given such spells in a punishment cell. Officials then sent Sultonov to a harsher prison (see forthcoming F18News article).

Repeated torture of prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov for praying

In 2021, Tashkent City Criminal Court jailed prisoner of conscience Tulkun Tashmuradovich Astanov (born 25 April 1971) for five years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2631) for defending Muslims' freedom of religion and belief.

In 2021, officials of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 repeatedly tortured him, in June for praying the namaz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) (Muslim daily prayer), and in October also

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2688). As a result his health seriously deteriorated.

The regime tries to stop its Muslim prisoners from praying the namaz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), and frequently tortures those who do meet other Muslims for prayer. If prison authorities detect groups of Muslims praying together, they will be put in punishment cells for several days, Muslims who Forum 18 has talked to from October 2024 onwards have stated. Prison authorities may not detect or punish individual prisoners praying the namaz alone.

Against legally-binding international human rights obligations, no-one has ever been held to account (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) for the torture of prisoners of conscience such as Astanov. In July 2021, Governor Farrukh Ismatov of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 refused to explain to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) why no-one has been arrested and put on criminal trial for torturing Astanov or other prisoners.

As the United Nations Committee against Torture (CAT) noted in its Concluding Observations on Uzbekistan in January 2020 (CAT/C/UZB/CO/5 (<https://undocs.org/CAT/C/UZB/CO/5>)): "The Committee remains deeply concerned at reports that torture and ill-treatment continue to be routinely committed by, at the instigation of and with the consent of the State party's law enforcement, investigative and prison officials."

International human rights obligations

Uzbekistan is a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>). This defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."

Under the Convention, Uzbekistan is obliged both to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed, instigated or acquiesced to torture "or take other legal measures to ensure his [sic] presence", and also to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

Impunity for Astanov's suspect torturers "is mockery not justice"

Again during 2023 and 2024, officials of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 tortured prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov on multiple occasions, including threatening him with death.

During autumn 2023, prison officer Davr Sottiyev on multiple occasions severely beat, suffocated, and threatened Astanov with death. "He told Astanov that he will not let him leave the prison alive. Before Astanov leaves, he [Sottiyev] will give Astanov an injection which will soon kill him," a local Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in February 2025. As a result of Sottiyev's severe physical torture, prisoner of conscience Astanov was placed in the prison medical unit.

The prison officer on duty (who refused to give his name) at Bukhara Region's General Regime Prison No. 1 refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 18 February about the torture of prisoner of conscience Astanov. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to Prison Governor Farrukh Ismatov.

In 2024, prisoner of conscience Astanov made multiple complaints about the torture he suffered to the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the Ombudsperson. Officials have taken no action against prison officer Sottiyev or other suspect torturers.

The regime's only response was to send an alleged forensic medical "expert" to the prison in spring 2024. The "expert" wrote a report claiming that prisoner of conscience Astanov had "no traces of wounds or bruises on his body". The Muslim commented: "This is mockery not justice."

Prison governor threatens relatives if they complain

In January 2025, Governor Farrukh Ismatov of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 called various relatives of prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov. He claimed to them that Astanov is fine and that they have no need to complain to the authorities about his situation. The relatives understood that they were being threatened with punishment if they lodge complaints.

Various officials of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, who refused to give their full

names, between 10 and 12 February refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the multiple cases of torture inflicted on prisoner of conscience Astanov.

Damir (who refused to give his last name), who leads the international affairs section of the Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, refused on 12 February to answer Forum 18's questions. He asked to be called back in three hours when "I will have time to answer you". He did not answer his phone whenever Forum 18 called back.

Various General Prosecutor's Office officials, who refused to give their names, also refused to answer Forum 18's questions. Press Service official Asadullo Fatkhullayev claimed he would answer Forum 18's questions in writing by the end of the working day on 12 February. Forum 18 had received no answer by the end of the working day of 19 February.

Aziz Yuldashev in the regime-appointed Human Rights Commissioner or Ombudsperson's Office, who deals with complaints, claimed to Forum 18 on 12 February that he had not heard of prisoner of conscience Astanov. Yuldashev went on to claim that he would "check in our system if indeed there were complaints" and by the end of the working day reply to Forum 18's questions.

Yuldashev then contradicted himself by also claiming that he would provide the contact details of responsible officials in the Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments to which the Ombudsperson's Office had (allegedly) made enquiries about prisoner of conscience Astanov.

Despite Yuldashev's promise to reply by the end of 12 February, Forum 18 had received no answer by the end of the working day of 19 February.

Prisoner of conscience Astanov is being held in General Regime Prison No. 1 in Bukhara Region, over 440 kilometres (275 miles) from his home in Tashkent. His prison address is:

Buxoro viloyati

Kagan tumani

Ichki Ishlar Bulimi JIEB

1-sonli jozoni ijro etish koloniyasi

Tulkun Tashmuradovich Astanov

Uzbekistan

(END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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