

# Protesting Kyrgyz Prisoners Turn to Self-Mutilation

January 31, 2012



A prisoner on a hunger strike has his mouth sewn with a wire in Bishkek. **Vladimir Pirogov**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — More than 1,000 prisoners in Kyrgyzstan have sewn their lips together, a grotesque act inmates describe as a protest over their dismal conditions, but which authorities blame on organized criminal gangs who resent attempts to break the power they wield in prisons.

Kyrgyzstan holds about 7,600 inmates in its detention centers. The buildings are notoriously crowded and disease-ridden, and they have not escaped the reach of powerful criminal syndicates who also threaten the stability of the country, which hosts Russian and U.S. air bases.

Over the years, prisoners have staged numerous protests — until Saturday, the vast majority of the prisoners were on a 10-day-long hunger strike. But the sewing of lips has been one of the most unusual and brazen ways to bring attention to the prisoners' plight.

An Associated Press reporter who was allowed to visit a pretrial detention facility recently saw

several prisoners with their lips stitched together, leaving enough space to take in liquids, but not enough to eat food. Some prisoners used strands of coarse fiber or pieces of wire.

A 22-year-old, who gave his name only as Yevgeny, said awkwardly through his constricted lips that he was “suffering for justice.”

But the facility’s director, Mars Zhusupbekov, countered that the protest was a reaction to his own attempts to bring justice.

Zhusupbekov said he was appointed head of the facility in Bishkek last month and soon learned that a group of 23 inmates was allowed to roam the prison freely, extorting money from others.

“Intimidated prisoners would call their relatives and ask them to sell their apartment or car, and then transfer the money to the gang in jail,” Zhusupbekov said.

So he said he decided to launch raids on cells in mid-January to stamp out the thugs. About a week later, inmates started to sew their lips together, an act he said was forced on frightened prisoners by the criminal gang in his facility.

Crime experts say prison gangs in former Soviet nations are typically part of a complex hierarchical fraternity that extends across the penitentiary system and is ultimately subservient to criminal leaders beyond jail walls.

Almost 400 prisoners bound their lips at Zhusupbekov’s jail, and as many as 800 others are believed to have done the same in other jails in what they say is an act of solidarity. Authorities say it is only the influence of organized crime that could have enabled protests on such a large scale.

Zhusupbekov was sanguine about the lip-sewing, describing it as a similar procedure to piercing, and dismissed complaints about poor prison conditions.

“This is not a hotel, this is not a holiday resort, they should serve their time,” he said.

Prisoners said the raids were an attempt by Zhusupbekov to brutally assert his authority.

“We were just decorating our cell when they threw in a smoke grenade and then they beat us all,” said Ulan Sheraliyev, who is awaiting trial on charges of robbery.

“And so we are starving and demanding that this not happen again and that the perpetrator be punished.”

For years, underfunded police and galloping corruption have enabled local mafia groups engaged in narcotics trafficking and other crimes to flourish and authorities say the writ of crime gangs extends deep into the nation’s jails.

But State Correctional Service chairman Sheishenbek Baizakov says the system was rotten from the top down.

“I fired 80 percent of prison directors, because over the past few years, they created corrupt

schemes and forged alliances with the criminal world,” said Baizakov, who was appointed to the post last year. “They laundered money and instead of buying normal food, they would buy rotten and expired goods and just kept the money for themselves.”

Baizakov said several former penitentiary directors now face prosecution for alleged crimes that include running the prison drug trade.

The protests in Kyrgyzstan’s prisons have caused international alarm.

Matteo Mecacci, chair of the human rights committee of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly, issued a statement in the past week calling for an easing of conditions in detention facilities.

Reforming the country’s jails is seen as an urgent priority by President Almazbek Atambayev’s government, which is battling to maintain stability in the face of opposition from political rivals and organized crime syndicates.

Atambayev was elected last year amid vows he would rid the country of corruption, which prospered under former leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Bakiyev was thrown out of power in a violent street uprising in April 2010.

Signs of unrest are viewed with deep apprehension in the West because Kyrgyzstan hosts a U.S. air base that serves as an important transportation hub for military operations in nearby Afghanistan.

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