



FREEDOM NOW

28 May 2019

Mr. Donald Tusk
President of the European Council
European Council
Rue de la Loi 175
B-1048 Brussels
Belgium

Dear Mr. Tusk,

In advance of your upcoming trip to Tajikistan, we request you express concern to President Emomali Rahmon about the politically motivated imprisonment of opposition political leaders and the deteriorating prison conditions that put the lives of these leaders in imminent danger.

Since 2014, the Tajik government has overseen a widespread crackdown on peaceful political opposition. Among those most targeted are members of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the country's leading opposition party. The government arrested IRPT's leadership in September 2015 after accusing them of participating in a failed coup. A dozen IRPT members are serving sentences ranging from 14 years to life in prison.

The plight of the IRPT has become significantly more alarming after imprisoned members were attacked and killed at the maximum security Kirpichniy Prison on May 19. According to the Ministry of Justice, three prison guards and 29 prisoners were killed in what was officially described as a riot. Reportedly, the riot began when members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) killed three guards and then specifically sought out other prisoners for execution. Among the victims were three IRPT members - Sattor Karimov, Saeed Qiyomiddin Ghozi, and Jomahmad Boev. Several other IRPT members were injured during the riot. Zayd Saidov, an opposition politician unaffiliated with the IRPT, was also targeted by ISIS members, but was protected from harm by fellow prisoners. According to sources, both Mr. Karimov and Mr. Saidov were targeted because they had previously engaged in theological debates with ISIS members.

While it is reported that ISIS members were the perpetrators of this violence, there remain concerns about the extent to which the government could have prevented the attack. A former prisoner at Kirpichniy stated that prison guards encouraged division of religious groups within the facility and exacerbated tensions. Regardless of whether divisions were promoted, it is clear ISIS members targeted IRPT members.

The European Union has made significant investments in Tajikistan. Between 2014 and 2020 it will provide €251 million in development aid for projects related to education, health, and rural development. As Tajikistan's third largest trade partner, economic support of the European Union is crucial. This relationship will deepen if Tajikistan is added to the Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+). In considering whether to grant GSP+ status to Tajikistan, the European Union is in the unique position of ensuring that Dushanbe commits to, and implements, basic human rights standards. Dushanbe must understand that the European Union will not grant GSP+ status to Tajikistan unless and until it addresses the human rights violations inflicted upon those prisoners unjustifiably behind bars.

We are aware that the European Union is closely monitoring the situation and has raised a number of human rights concerns with the Tajik government. However, the Tajik government continues to imprison IRPT leaders who find themselves the targets of deadly attacks.

We urge you to raise the issue of deteriorating prison conditions in your meeting with President Rahmon and request the Tajik government immediately release all IRPT members from detention or at the very least transfer them to home detention where their safety can be guaranteed. You should also seek commitments that Tajikistan uphold its international obligations to respect freedom of association, assembly, and expression.

Your visit to Tajikistan is an opportunity to convey the European Union's concern at the highest level about the imminent dangers the IRPT members face in detention. We are confident your leadership and commitment to human rights will motivate the government to take positive steps in improving the situation.

Sincerely,



Maran Turner
Executive Director
Freedom Now