



**Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial** works on protection of the rights of discriminated groups in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, carrying out monitoring, reporting, advocacy on local and international level, opposing discrimination by litigation and human rights education.

**January 14, 2022**

**Issue: The situation in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, Tajikistan: The government shuts down internet and communications and takes other excessive measures**

### **Summary**

In late November 2021, residents of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, Tajikistan (GBAO), whose population is mainly comprised of Pamiris, an ethnoreligious minority, held mass protests against arbitrary actions taken by security structures and the authorities' rejection of dialogue. The authorities reacted by shutting down the internet and mobile communications, ramping up the military presence in the region, blocking roads, increasing the number of checkpoints, and publishing more agitational materials in the media.

The disconnection of communications is having a highly detrimental effect on life in GBAO. Individuals and business organizations are not able to make payments, withdraw cash from ATMs, or send reports to tax and other state agencies. The blackout of mobile communications in a region with extreme living conditions (high altitude, wintertime, far from medical centers) during the COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to the fundamental rights of the area's population. Violation of the right to education caused by the communications shutdown is of particular concern.

It is possible that the excessive use of emergency measures will create risks for conflicts which, if manipulated, could become ethnic in nature. The situation in GBAO requires a response from international bodies, and the authorities in the country should focus on providing economic and cultural support for the region, avoiding repressive measures, and preventing discrimination and violations of the law.

These risks have become especially urgent because of the crisis in Kazakhstan (January 2022), when a wave of violence in the country gave the heads of state of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) countries a reason to react with force, including by bringing an international military contingent into Kazakhstan.

*This communication is based on information received by ADC Memorial from Pamiris living in GBAO, Tajikistan and other countries, and on open sources.*

## Overview

The Pamiris are members of a number of peoples populating the vast highlands in eastern Tajikistan (Shugnid, Rushan, Wakhi, Ishkashimi, Yazgulami, and others). They speak their own languages, can be identified by their appearance, have a different culture than the ethnic majority, and are mainly Shiite Muslims, unlike the majority of the population, which is Sunni. There are almost 200,000 Pamiris in GBAO. In an alternative [report](#) for the UN CERD (2017), ADC Memorial reported that the biased treatment of Pamiris includes ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and political aspects in light of these characteristics: They are identifiable both in terms of appearance and language, are considered “incorrect” Muslims, and are suspected of having separatist sentiments. The Pamiris are not recognized as an ethnic minority (for example, they are not counted separately in censuses).

The Pamiri are underrepresented in governance and administrative bodies, and the leadership and the overwhelming majority of staff at security structures in GBAO are from other regions of Tajikistan. Our sources link the increase in their numbers with the high level of corruption and lawlessness, as well as with evidence of fabricated criminal cases, extortion (including from members of the business community), false confessions obtained through severe torture, prosecutorial bias in the justice system, and the crude and unethical behavior of security officers, particularly in relation to women.

The state does not support the study or wider use of Pamiri languages. Our sources noted that schools and even daycares are under growing pressure (security officers visit educational institutions and demand that teachers and students only use the Tajik language; institutions are subjected to various checks by the prosecutor’s office and security agencies, which is not part of the latter’s jurisdiction). Local television stations never broadcast in Pamiri languages. In addition, the official infosphere ignores events of importance to Pamiris. For example, on December 13, Shiite Muslims throughout the world celebrate the birth of their spiritual leader, Aga Khan IV, but local television stations did not even mention this, even though they had in previous years.

GBAO is facing economic difficulties, its road and transportation systems are not developed (the roads are in terrible condition, there are no flights to or from other regions of Tajikistan), and its industrial infrastructure is in dire straits. In general, the Pamiris are more likely to migrate than residents of other regions because of unemployment (in the GBAO, the unemployment rate of workers aged 15 to 75 was 26.8, with a national average of 11.5, Statistical Agency Under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, [2016 data](#)).

Protests in GBAO have repeatedly been followed by a severe response from the authorities of an independent Tajikistan. The most dramatic case occurred in 2012, when an armed confrontation between the Tajik army and the local population took place in Khorugh (the capital of GBAO) and its outskirts; the Pamiris viewed this confrontation as a reprisal against them. Since then, the military presence in GBAO has been heightened and checkpoints have been set up. Some experts call this a state of “undeclared martial law” and believe that the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) has essentially been given the authority to manage the region.

## **Protests of November 2021 and the current situation**

The cause of the mass protests of November 25 to 28, 2021 (which took place mainly in Khorugh, where hundreds of people came out on the square) was the death of 29-year-old local resident Gulbiddin Ziyobekov during a security operation. Two other young people (Gulnazar Murodbekov and Tutisho Amirshoyev) died in the confrontation; about 10 protestors were injured, and five police officers and three security officers were hurt. Residents believe that the police used firearms without any justification.

On November 28, 2021, the protestors dispersed after government representatives promised to meet their demands not to prosecute demonstrators, to conduct a quick, unbiased, and effective investigation into the deaths of G. Ziyobekov, G. Murodbekov, and T. Amirshoyev, and to restore internet connections and all types of communications services in GBAO. At the same time, an agreement was reached allowing 44 civil activists from different GBAO regions to track the progress of the investigation. On December 19, 2021, Faromuz Irgashev, head of Group 44, released a video message addressing the threat to peace and stability in GBAO posed by the actions of law enforcement bodies and asked Rustam Emomali, the leader of the upper house of parliament, to take the situation in Khorugh under his personal control.

At the time of this submission, internet and mobile communications in GBAO have not been restored in full (if there is any internet connection at all, it is very slow). Since GBAO is essentially under an information blockade, television broadcasts only present a one-sided view of the situation. The media is reporting that the authorities have banned 66 demonstrators from leaving GBAO and are putting pressure on the members of civil society who were given access to information about the investigation (they were forced to condemn the demonstration on television).

A large military contingent made up of over 3,500 soldiers and officers and a large amount of military equipment, including armored vehicles, is present in the region. The authorities have set up several checkpoints throughout GBAO to inspect cars. Our sources reported that during inspections, law enforcement officers insult and humiliate residents, including women, and extort money from them, which provokes Pamiris to respond. They noted cases where law enforcement officers behaved rudely in public and knowingly violated traffic rules, including driving in a drunken state, which resulted in accidents in which local residents were injured and even killed.

Because of the above, GBAO residents are in a state of constant tension: They fear for themselves and their family members, are afraid to leave the house or let their children out, and are not able to let their relatives abroad know how they are. Many of them find analogies with the past, during the civil war of 1993 to 1997.

**T.G., native of Khorugh:** “In the 1990s, I was afraid to talk at the university, I was afraid to speak my native language, we were humiliated by police officers during raids. The current events in Pamir remind me of the civil war in Tajikistan.

**N.M., resident of Khorugh:** “During the demonstration, security officers armed with automatic weapons were walking along the roads in the center of Khorugh and loudly shouting offensive words at local young people, even though there were women and children on the street. The security officers provoked the local youth into a conflict. Officers who come from other regions of Tajikistan do not know or understand Pamiri customs and traditions. They often contemptuously call Pamiris “Hans,” like they did during the civil war in 1991 to 1997.

**T.S., resident of Khorugh:** “Security officers in GBAO go around homes and organizations in Khorugh and the oblast and force people to lie about Gulbuddin’s murder and the demonstration in November 2021. Relatives are told to read a prepared text in their

cells after being threatened with losing their jobs or prosecution. Young Pamiri men are detained under various pretexts and summoned for questioning to scare and overwhelm them. They are creating all the conditions to force people to leave with their families.”

The population is concerned by the recent decree of the Tajik government “On the procedures for internal migration of the population from land-poor and densely populated mountainous regions to fallow valleys for 2022 to 2024” (published in December 2021). This decree proposes relocating over 900 families, including 50 families from Darwaz and Ishkoshim districts, GBAO to Khatlon Oblast, Tajikistan. It should be noted that the Yaghnobis, an ethnic minority relocated in Soviet times without proper support and respect for their identity, experienced the total loss of their language and culture.

In January 2022, peaceful mass protests in Kazakhstan suddenly developed into a wave of violence, prompting severe responses from the government, thousands of detentions, and the arrival of a CSTO military contingent. These events will undoubtedly have long-term consequences throughout all of Central Asia, including in terms of ethnic relations and minority rights. Leaders of CSTO states, including the president of Tajikistan, have proposed creating a military “buffer zone” along CSTO borders when faced with the threat of terrorism. For GBAO and Tajikistan in general, this signifies the risk of a heightened military presence and the suppression of the population’s civil liberties.

### **Violation of children’s right to education**

Because of the loss of connectivity, students in the older grades who plan to receive a higher education were not able to submit applications and/or take admissions tests. State quotas at universities in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan apply to children who are residents of GBAO. Many graduates receive stipends from universities in other countries and charitable organizations, but the process for completing all the paperwork begins long before the academic year and continues throughout it. If the applicant misses even one stage (completing forms, testing, interview, etc.), they are eliminated from the competition.

Because of the loss of connections, in November senior pupils were forced to leave GBAO for other regions of Tajikistan to take online tests and/or submit their applications, which was a major expense (for transportation and living expenses). Children from poorer families that could not afford a trip outside of the oblast were in a particularly vulnerable position, so their plans for a higher education were put at risk.

There have not been any commercial flights into GBAO since 2018 (only military and special helicopters are allowed to fly), and trips from GBAO to Dushanbe are particularly risky in the wintertime (the 620 km trip along roads that run through mountain passes and are difficult to access takes 14 to 16 hours in an off-road vehicle). The cost of such a trip in an off-road vehicle that seats seven people is 65 euros (which is a lot of money for GBAO), and money is also needed for living expenses in Dushanbe.

Below is information about children who were not able to take their exams or apply for a stipend because of the loss of connectivity in GBAO (provided by children and parents):

**A.Sh., 17 1/2, a senior** at a secondary school in Khorugh, was supposed to take the test to enroll in a Russian university (Novosibirsk, Ekaterinburg). A.Sh. is an all-around A student, an active participant in Olympiads, and an excellent Russian speaker. He was not able to travel to Dushanbe because of his family’s difficult financial situation and missed the exams.

**D.S., 17, a senior** at a secondary school in Shughnon District, GBAO, dreamed of enrolling at the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research in Almaty. He studied English and attended extracurricular classes in math. He wanted to be an

architect or an engineer. He was scheduled to participate in an online competition for a stipend in early December. His plans were ruined, since his family had no way of paying for his trip or stay in Dushanbe. His mother does not work, and his father is a migrant worker in Russia. He is devastated that he must now give up his dreams of a higher education.

**G.A., 17, a senior** at a secondary school in Roshtqal'a District, GBAO, was supposed to have an online test and interview to enroll in a Russian university (Moscow and Ekaterinburg). She dreams of becoming a doctor and has completed five years of additional studies in various subjects (Chemistry, Russian Language, Biology, and Algebra). She speaks English very well. She was not able to travel to Dushanbe because there are many children in her family (she is the fifth child) and her parents were not able to pay for the round trip and several days of living expenses.

**S.P., 16 1/2, a senior** at a secondary school in Ishkoshim District, GBAO, planned to enroll in an American university and take exams for Moscow universities. She was supposed to take part in a scholarship competition and complete the steps for enrolling at a university abroad. She was not able to travel to Dushanbe because of financial problems. She is now depressed and upset.

**We call on UN human rights structures to respond to the situation in GBAO, Tajikistan.**

**The Tajik authorities must urgently restore mobile communications and ensure reliable internet access in all GBAO districts. Special attention should be paid to ensuring the rights to education and medical care. An effective dialogue must be established between the authorities and the population, and there must be a transparent, effective, and speedy investigation into the circumstances under which people perished during the protests and security operations.**