

Tajikistan: 25 members of armed underground group escape from prison

On the night of 22-23 August, 25 members of an armed Islamic underground group escaped from police custody of the National Security Service in Dushanbe. Signals of a rise in the terrorist threat have been emanating from Tajikistan since at least the last year. In this context, the escape of a large group of important members of the armed underground arouses serious fears for the efficiency of Tajikistan's state structures, and in the longer term, it may be an omen of the destabilisation of the country.

Most of the escapees belonged to a group of persons arrested last summer and sentenced on 20 August this year, as the result of a crackdown on the opposition and the pacification of the eastern part of the country. They include close relatives of Mirzo Ziyoyev, the leader of the United Tajik Opposition during the period of the civil war in 1990s, who was shot during the government offensive; but the group also included foreigners from Russia, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, who are probably linked to international terrorist organisations. None of the escapees has as yet been caught. The government suspects that they are currently in the Rasht valley in the eastern part of the country, which during the civil war was a bastion of the opposition. Tajikistan has asked for help from Russia and Interpol in apprehending the fugitives.

Tajikistan's increasingly fragile stability is part of the very tense situation in the region. Having anarchic Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan as neighbours means that transfers of people, arms and drugs across porous borders is relatively easy. The probable deterioration of the internal situation in Tajikistan threatens the development of a zone of instability which could pose a very serious threat to the whole Central Asian region. <MMat>