

25 Militants Escape From Tajik Prison

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — A group of 25 Islamist militants serving time on terrorism charges have escaped from a prison in Tajikistan's capital after dramatic assaults that left at least five guards dead, the security services said Monday.

The escaped convicts include many members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan terrorist group, among them four Afghan citizens and six Russians from Dagestan and Chechnya, officials said.

The violent breakout from a prison run by the National State Security Committee in the capital, Dushanbe, has dealt the government an embarrassing blow after it claimed successes lately in a clampdown on suspected militant organizations.

The prisoners attacked their guards late Sunday, killing one and badly wounding two others, the security services said. They then grabbed a supply of weapons, changed into camouflage uniforms and fled.

Three hours later, at 1:10 a.m., they attacked a nearby prison checkpoint, killing four guards, the security services said. They then drove off in vehicles, their direction and destination

unknown.

President Emomali Rakhmon has ordered the Interior Ministry to boost the presence of armed police on roads and at airports and railway stations.

Impoverished Tajikistan, which shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, has enjoyed relative stability since the end of a civil war in the 1990s that pitted a loose coalition of Islamist fighters and nationalists against elements of the former Soviet elite.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, is a group that emerged in the 1990s and at its outset comprised militants mainly set on toppling the authoritarian regimes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The IMU had training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan and at one time fought on the side of the Taliban, but was believed to have suffered significant setbacks in the U.S.-led operations. Analysts have speculated that security operations along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan last year may have compelled militants to return to their home countries in Central Asia, prompting an upsurge in their activity in the region.

Trials against alleged terrorist cell members in Tajikistan are usually held behind closed doors, and details of investigations remain closely guarded, making it difficult to determine the exact activities and goals of the locally based militant groups.

One of the fugitives was identified as Abdurasul Mirzoyev, brother of a jailed former head of the presidential guards, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison last month on charges of involvement in a plot to overthrow the government.

Among the others who escaped were some of the 46 people sentenced to lengthy prison terms last week for involvement with an illegal armed gang led by Mirzo Ziyoyev, a commander of the United Tajik Opposition, a rebel group in the civil war.

Most Islamist fighters gave up armed resistance after reaching an uneasy peace settlement with the government. But many returned to a hard-line anti-government position over concerns that they were being squeezed out of official positions granted to them as part of the peace agreement.

Ziyoyev's group was largely neutralized after the army and police mounted a large-scale operation in a remote mountainous area in eastern Tajikistan last summer. Authorities said the organization aimed to overthrow the government.

Security officials said Ziyoyev himself was killed last summer while assisting authorities during an operation against a former associate in the days after his arrest.

The international community remains concerned about reports of Islamist militants operating in countries north of Afghanistan.

Some government critics, however, accuse Tajik authorities of exaggerating the danger posed by Islamist groups as grounds for stamping out political freedoms.

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