The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Inside Russia's Secretive Prisons as Coronavirus Takes Hold

Prisoners described an anxious state of affairs in jails across the country. Meanwhile, calls for amnesty have been ignored.

By Pjotr Sauer and Evan Gershkovich

April 27, 2020



Authorities have confirmed that prisoners or guards tested positive in eight prisons across seven different Russian regions. **Kirill Kukhmar / TASS**

A prisoner in penal colony no. 1 in the city of Yaroslavl has less than three months left of his three-year sentence for drug possession. But with the coronavirus raging around Russia, July 15 feels like an eternity away.

"It's impossible to keep any sort of distance from each other here," he said. "The guards wear masks, but when they bring us out for checks they bunch us together in big groups."

In Rybinsk, another city in the Yaroslavl region along the Volga River, fear of catching the coronavirus is tangible in penal colony no. 12. There, a prisoner told The Moscow Times that

dozens of inmates have come down with fever.

“We are very worried,” said the inmate, who has seven years left of his sentence for assault and theft. “We do want to live.”

The men were two of seven prisoners serving time in seven different jails across Russia who described an increasingly anxious state of affairs in the country’s penitentiary system. All asked for anonymity as they spoke to The Moscow Times using mobile phones they are not permitted to have in their possession.

Human rights activists have described prisons — with prisoners crammed into tight spaces with poor ventilation — as petri dishes for the spread of the coronavirus. To prevent mass infections in their prisons, countries from Iran to Bahrain to Sudan have released tens of thousands of inmates.

Even before the worst global pandemic in over a century, prisoners were some of the most vulnerable populations. In Russia, which has the world’s third-largest prison population, about 10 percent of prisoners are HIV positive, while some 14,000 have active tuberculosis, according to Ksenia Runova, who researches prison health at the European University in St. Petersburg.

Related article: Campaigners Urge Russia to Release Prisoners as Coronavirus Spreads

Nonetheless, the country has not only rejected calls by human rights groups and several lawmakers to release prisoners, it has tasked 120 penal colonies with sewing masks to support the fight against the coronavirus, as cases topped 87,000 countrywide Monday morning.

Now, the coronavirus has spread to prisons across the country. As of Monday, authorities had confirmed that prisoners or guards tested positive in eight prisons across seven different regions.

In the worst of the outbreaks, 21 prisoners and two prison guards tested positive last week in two corrective institutions in the Jewish autonomous district in the Far East, including medical correctional institution no. 2 in the village of Bira, which mostly houses convicts with tuberculosis.

The wife of one, who asked that her last name be withheld so prison officials wouldn’t be able to determine which inmate was speaking with his spouse via personal phone, said the prisoners have not been given any form of protection.

“If he gets coronavirus,” Yana, 50, said of her husband, “it’ll kill him.”

Black boxes

Human rights activists and lawyers who work with prisoners say that, even under normal circumstances, Russia’s Federal Prison Service is an opaque institution.

Since the pandemic hit Russia last month, the penitentiary system has become nearly impossible to pierce, they say.

Prisons have stopped allowing in visitors or packages — even medicine — in an effort to keep the coronavirus outside their walls. In some cases, prison guards are working 14 days on, 14 days off.

They have walled themselves off from the world so completely that prisoners are now only allowed to communicate with their lawyers — and there's no guarantee of even that.

One woman in the Orenburg region bordering Kazakhstan recounted that she spent nearly three weeks looking for her husband after he was moved to a different prison on April 1. Last week he finally got in touch with her via a fellow prisoner's phone, but the woman still hasn't been notified through official channels.

The besieged fortress mentality means prisoners' rights groups are relying solely on the dozens of complaints they receive each day from prisoners — who themselves have little access to information — to try to understand what is going on behind bars.

On its website, the Russia Behind Bars group has been tracking those complaints, which read like a stream of anguished distress signals: high numbers of sick prisoners with fevers and acute respiratory infection symptoms, prison guards not wearing masks, prisoners not given them at all.

As that information has surfaced, the Federal Prison Service has assumed a defensive crouch, lawyers say.

Last week, Russia Behind Bars head Olga Romanova was called in for questioning by the Investigative Committee for allegedly spreading fake news on the coronavirus. A law passed at the end of March dictates that a charge on those grounds could result in up to five years in prison.

The crackdown has even led Russia's most prominent investigative newspaper to muzzle itself on the topic.

In a column last week, Vera Cherischeva, a reporter for Novaya Gazeta, wrote that the new law has prevented the paper from publishing the dozens of "SOS signals" from prisoners it is receiving per day.

Novaya Gazeta's hesitation is not unfounded: Earlier this month the paper was forced to delete an article on the spread of the coronavirus in the republic of Chechnya after the General Prosecutor's Office deemed it fake.

Tracking the signals

The Federal Prison Service has said it has 49 laboratories around the country that, as of April 9, had processed 1,400 coronavirus tests for prisoners.

None of the prisoners who spoke to The Moscow Times said they had been tested for the coronavirus. According to those prisoners, relatives of other inmates and human rights activists, even simple temperature checks are in many prisons only being given on request.

Meanwhile, Moscow-based rights organization Public Verdict has received complaints of high

numbers of raised temperatures and respiratory symptoms from inmates in the following regions: Marii El, Belgorod, Perm, Yaroslavl, Kirovsk, the Jewish autonomous district, Chuvashia, Vologda, Krasnodar, Tatarstan, Moscow, Murmansk, Tula and Ryazan.

Six of those regions have since confirmed positive tests at their prisons.

A prison guard in Tver region's penal colony no. 9, who asked for anonymity as they were not authorized to speak on the subject, told The Moscow Times that the jail is not checking inmates' temperatures, let alone testing them for the coronavirus. The guard added that cells are not being cleaned more than prior to the pandemic.

"I don't think we are hiding any numbers here," the guard said. "We simply don't know who is sick."

Related article: Russia Jails the Most People in Europe, Monitor Says

Olga Zeveleva, a researcher studying Russian prisons at the University of Helsinki, believes prison employees are being driven by a desire not to "earn a reputation as warden of a coronavirus prison."

"These are likely local efforts to sweep everything under the rug," she said.

Keeping an outbreak under the rug for long, though, will prove difficult as reports leak — though activists believe the Federal Prison Service might still try.

Late on April 16, Public Verdict put in a request to prison officials at Rybinsk's penal colony no. 12 for prisoners to be tested for the coronavirus after prisoners reported symptoms.

Early the next morning, the lawyers spotted a statement published online by the regional administration denying rumors of coronavirus in the colony.

"They clearly couldn't have tested prisoners in that time," said Irina Biryukova, a lawyer with the organization.

Last week, a Rybinsk inmate told The Moscow Times that prisoners with fevers were being sent to a single barracks. The situation he described mirrored an April 24 report by Russia Behind Bars on Yaroslavl's penal colony no. 3 in the town of Uglich: "There are many patients with symptoms of acute respiratory viral infections. The medical unit is full. A three-story barracks was prepared for the sick."

In the event of an outbreak, Runova, the prison health researcher, said that the Federal Prison Service's healthcare system — which does not fall under the Health Ministry's purview — will struggle as it suffers from a lack of resources, particularly nurses.

Prison hospitals can be so short-staffed that Daniil Vostrov, 30, an inmate at Yaroslavl's penal colony no. 14 until June 2019, spent four years as a surgeon's assistant at the prison hospital with no prior medical experience.

"I would do a lot of work that I really had no right to do," Vostrov, who worked at a morgue

before being imprisoned for theft and is now a machinist at a Yaroslavl oil refinery, told The Moscow Times.

As Russia mobilizes human resources — including prisoners — in its wider battle against the pandemic, Runova said she hasn't seen signs that the country is trying to protect the inmates themselves.

"It looks like the government has given up on them," she said.

Growing desperation

Some activists had expected that the authorities might stick to the tradition of releasing some prisoners on May 9 — World War II Victory Day.

But last week, head of the presidential human rights council Valery Fadeyev said that won't happen this year, as the country's "legislative bodies do not want to carry out an amnesty."

"As far as we understand there won't be any amnesty this year," said Biryukova of Public Verdict. "We have no hope for it at the moment."

As the Federal Prison Service has taken measures to keep the coronavirus out of Russia's prisons, life has only gotten worse for inmates — from a lack of access to vital medicines, to not being able to contact their loved ones.

Earlier this month, a riot broke out at a Siberian prison, resulting in at least one death. Last week, France 24 reported that activists and family members have still not been able to locate 60 inmates.

Although it was unclear whether the riot was tied to stricter quarantine measures, Zeveleva of the University of Helsinki said experience shows that, in these conditions, additional riots can be expected.

Indeed, on April 20, a riot was quashed before it could boil over at another Siberian prison, the Federal Prison Service reported.

At penal colony no. 11 in the Nizhny Novgorod region, an inmate described increasing despair among his fellow convicts.

"A lot of us are very desperate," he said. "I sew masks all day next to other prisoners and we aren't being tested at all. We are literally sitting on top of each other."

"Many of my friends are disappointed that amnesty isn't happening, but I expected nothing else," the inmate added. "This government doesn't give prisoners second chances."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/27/inside-russias-secretive-prisons-as-coronavirus-takes-hold-a70108