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Rights Groups Decry Russian Deportations of Central Asian Activists

By AFP

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Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon maintains close relations with Russian leader Vladimir Putin
Sergei Bobylev/TASS

International rights groups raised alarm over recent transfers of activists to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan from Russia as top EU diplomat Josep Borrell met foreign ministers from five Central Asian states Monday.

Two activists residing outside tightly-controlled Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were reportedly deported back to their homelands from Russia, which maintains strong security ties with its fellow former Soviet republics, the rights groups said.

Ahead of Borrell's visit to Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, New York-headquartered Human Rights Watch and Vienna-based Freedom for Eurasia highlighted the cases of Azat Isakov of Turkmenistan and Izzat Amon from Tajikistan.

Freedom for Eurasia said on Sunday that Isakov was "abducted" by the Turkmen security services (MNB) with the assistance of Russia's FSB security service and police from his home in Russia on October 20, 2021.

"Before vanishing without a trace, he informed his colleague Chemen Ore on Telegram in writing: 'Police are here. If they find me, they will take me. I am hiding'. He was not heard from since that day," the group said.

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Freedom for Eurasia urged Brussels "to use [the ministerial meeting] to press the Turkmen government to release all political prisoners."

Human Rights Watch called this month for the immediate release of Isakov who "is at dire risk of torture and other abuses" in Turkmenistan, after publicly criticizing the government, which tolerates no opposition.

In another case, Amon, who campaigned for the rights of Tajik migrants living in Russia, was "forcibly disappeared in Moscow in March 2021 and unlawfully transferred to Tajikistan," Human Rights Watch researcher Syinat Sultanalieva told AFP on Monday.

"The EU should take the opportunity this week to put the focus on Tajikistan's rights crackdown and call for (the) release of political prisoners," Sultanalieva said in written remarks.

Amon's lawyer Saiburhon Sharifov said last month that Amon was sentenced to nine years in prison on fraud charges in Tajikistan, which has not officially confirmed his arrest.

Forcible transfers of Central Asian activists from Russia have grown more common in recent years.

Another Tajik activist, Sharofiddin Gadoev, was forcibly taken to Tajikistan from Russia in 2019, only to be allowed to return to his home in the Netherlands two weeks later amid strong international criticism.

Borrell did not immediately reference human rights in his tweets on the Monday ministerial meeting.

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