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Open Letter to Major-General Emomali Sobirzoda, Commander of the Ground Forces of Tajikistan, on cases of hazing in military units under his authority¹

23 June 2015

Dear General Sobirzoda,

On the occasion of the establishment of the Ground Forces of the Ministry of Defense of Tajikistan twenty-two years ago, we would like to congratulate you by drawing your attention to issues of concern to us, trusting your commitment to continuously improve the quality of the Ground Forces. We would like to urge you to pay particular attention to the issue of hazing and other abuse in the units under your command. Hazing of new recruits is believed to occur frequently and is usually carried out by fellow soldiers or, sometimes, officers. Such abuse often takes place with the consent, acquiescence or approval of officers or other military personnel.

In many cases victims of hazing are afraid to lodge complaints for fear of reprisals and complaints are usually only made in cases with particularly serious consequences, such as death of the victim or serious injuries. Three cases have come to our attention, where servicemen were subjected to hazing or other abuse in units of the Ground Forces in 2015, with a fatal outcome in one case.

According to his parents, twenty-one-year old **Firdavs Rakhmatov**, a student of Khujand State University, was not formally called up for military service but was arbitrarily detained on the street on 7 May 2015 and forcibly conscripted into the army. He served in military unit no. 04080 in the town of Kanibadam in Sughd region. His father later stated on his Facebook page that, shortly before his death, Firdavs told him he was beaten by other servicemen, but turned down his father's proposal to complain about the treatment for fear of reprisals. On 7 June, his parents were informed that Firdavs was dead and they were given his body for burial late that night. The parents reported they saw numerous bruises on his body and Firdavs Rakhmatov's father posted several photos on his facebook page as evidence. On 10 June, the Military Prosecutor's Office of Sughd Region charged two servicemen with "exceeding official authority" (Article 391, part 3 of the Criminal Code of Tajikistan) and a soldier with "violating the code of military conduct" (Article 373, part 2). According to official sources, the three men were taken into custody. Official sources informed media outlets that commanders of military unit no. 04080 were discharged from their duties. There are allegations that – also on 7 June – the same three men forced over twenty fellow-conscripts of Firdavs Rakhmatov to stand in line during a military training and beat one after the other.

Two further cases concern young men who served in military unit no. 12019 in Dushanbe:

On 6 March 2015, serviceman Farrukh Pulotov severely beat **Bakhriddin Nasriddinov**, a fellow-serviceman, in the canteen of their military unit, where the latter was on duty that morning. Bakhriddin Nasriddinov lost consciousness for several days and had to be hospitalized. The forensic medical

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examination established that the young man sustained serious head injuries, including a fracture of his skull, and serious bruises. Doctors removed a part of his skull bone measuring 8.5 x 8.5 cm because of brain swelling. On 9 March, Farrukh Pulotov was charged with "violating the code of military conduct" (Article 373, part 2(d) of the Criminal Code of Tajikistan). On 27 May, the Military Court of Dushanbe sentenced the perpetrator to 5.5 years' imprisonment, to be served in a strict prison colony. Bakhriddin Nasriddinov's lawyer lodged a complaint against the sentence stating that it is not commensurate with the gravity of the crime committed.

Romiz Sharifov joined the military unit no. 12019 in Dushanbe in the second half of 2014. His parents allege that he was repeatedly beaten by other servicemen of military unit no. 12019 in Dushanbe, where he served as a conscript. On one occasion he was beaten particularly severely to punish him for not correctly carrying out the military salutation. He deeply suffered from the experience and developed a psychological reaction that is accompanied by loss of speech and had to be hospitalized in April 2015. A criminal case was opened into the allegations, but no one has yet been charged. Romiz Sharifov is married and his wife is expecting their second child. He is still unable to speak and communicates only in writing.

As a State party to the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Tajikistan committed itself to uphold all human rights enshrined in the Convention. In November 2012, the UN Committee Against Torture reviewed the country's implementation of the Convention. In January 2013, the Committee published its Concluding Observations and expressed concern about hazing and ill-treatment in the army of Tajikistan. It recommended that: *The State party should reinforce measures to prohibit and eliminate hazing and ill-treatment in the armed forces and ensure prompt, impartial and thorough investigation of all allegations of such acts. Where evidence of hazing is found, it should establish the liability of direct perpetrators and those in the chain of command, prosecute and punish those responsible with penalties that are consistent with the gravity of the act committed, make the results of such investigations public, and provide compensation and full rehabilitation to victims, including through appropriate medical and psychological assistance.*

We were encouraged by the words of Abdukodir Nurov, the Military Prosecutor of Sughd region, who acknowledged at the Procuracy's press conference on 11 June 2015, that hazing continues to be a problem in the army of Tajikistan and who highlighted that this practice violates the army's service regulations.

As the Commander of the Ground Forces we urge you to declare publicly that hazing is unacceptable and that the perpetrators of such crimes must be brought to justice. We urge you to invite all members of the Ground Forces to consistently lodge complaints when hazing occurs and send a strong message to all staff that this practice has no place in the Ground Forces. We also ask you to ensure that servicemen can submit complaints confidentially in order to protect them from reprisals and that complaints are promptly passed on to Military prosecutors' offices for investigation.

We trust that you will take all necessary measures to prevent all practices violating the army's service regulations and other forms of abuse in the Ground Forces of Tajikistan, and we will be grateful to receive information on any concrete steps at: Prospekt Rudaki 137, 5th floor, office 41.