

Andijan Refugees Given Asylum

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Uzbeks who fled massacre offered new life abroad, though fate of some remains unclear.

More than 400 Uzbek refugees who fled to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan after the Andijan massacre are to be given new homes abroad.

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Uzbek refugees arrive at Manas airport
Photos by Vyacheslav Oseledko.

Several planes arrived in Jalalabad and Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan early in the morning on July 27 to bring the refugees to Bishkek, from where they'll be flown to an undisclosed location.

"The planes landed at exactly 7:15 am. I was very surprised, because I don't remember planes ever landing here so early. Then it became clear that they were here to collect refugees from Uzbekistan," said Valentina Gritsenko, the chairwoman of the human rights organisation Justice.

By late afternoon, more than 300 had arrived at Bishkek's Manas airport, all adult men. Approximately 100 women and children still at the Sasik refugee camp are expected to fly in on July 28.

"[They] will come on the next flight inshallah (God willing)," said refugee Karimberdi Ashurov.

Many of the new arrivals were taken to the ministry for emergency situations building, close to Manas airport, where an IWPR correspondent saw blankets spread on the floor for the refugees.

Carlos Zakanini, head of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, in Kyrgyzstan refused to say where the Uzbeks will go next, though speculation in the Kyrgyz media pointed to either the Czech Republic or Ukraine via Romania. Canada is also a possibility, according to foreign news agencies.

"We don't name the country where the refugees are being taken," said Zakanini. "The reason is simple. The receiving side does not want publicity because of the current crisis."

Uzbekistan has been pushing hard for the return of its citizens who fled the country after the May 13 government crackdown in Andijan.

Kyrgyzstan has also faced fierce pressure from the international community, which insists handing them back breaches international treaties as they would likely suffer severe repression at home.

The Washington Post reported recently that US officials warned that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would not come to the inauguration of President Kurmanbek Bakiev if he extradited more refugees to Uzbekistan.

In the weeks following the massacre, the Kyrgyz authorities handed over at least four, while 29 remain in a detention centre, on suspicion of criminal activities, awaiting a decision on whether they'll be sent back to Tashkent.

Zakanini said he hopes at least 25 will be allowed to join their fellow refugees on their flights abroad but admitted the situation of the remaining four is not yet clear.

A representative of the Kyrgyzstan ombudsman, Alima Amanova, said the refugees who arrived in Bishkek were in high spirits.

“I was able to enter the territory of the airport, and see the refugees who were brought in buses. Many of them recognised me and shook my hand. They were in a very good mood,” she said.

An IWPR correspondent was the first journalist to talk to the Uzbeks recently arrived from Jalalabad.

Karimberdi Ashurov, whose wife and children remain in Uzbekistan, said his parents tried to persuade him to return, but he refused. He is happy to be going abroad as even in Kyrgyzstan he did not feel safe from the Uzbek authorities.

“We don’t know how long we will be here before we go to another country. But since we have fled to Kyrgyzstan, there is no way back,” he said.

Another refugee, who preferred not to be named, added, “Since we have been living in Kyrgyzstan, we have found out what normal human life is like. Until there is any change to the regime in Uzbekistan, we don’t know what will happen to us.”

Rights groups in Kyrgyzstan had a mixed reaction to the imminent departure of the Uzbeks.

Edil Baisalov, leader of the NGO For Democracy and Civil Society, welcomed the decision to evacuate and urged that the 29 people still incarcerated in the Osh detention centre not be forgotten.

“They must also be sent to a third country, as their guilt has not been proved in court,” said Baisalov. “I hope that this will all end happily both for the refugees and for Kyrgyzstan.”

However, Tursunbek Akun, chairman of the Presidential Committee for Human Rights, believes the Uzbeks should have remained in Kyrgyzstan.

“If we are now prepared to send the refugees to a third country, then why did we accept them here in the first place?” he said.

“By our actions, we are telling the whole world that we were incapable of taking care of the refugees and their safety. We have admitted that we cannot yet call ourselves a democratic country if we do not fulfil our obligations to the international community.”

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Kyrgyzstan

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