

## **Army to Soak up Kazakhstan's Unemployed**

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After years of honing Kazak armed forces, they are now being asked to conscript young men just to take them off the streets.

A plan to conscript more soldiers into Kazakhstan's military looks like a desperate measure to cope with the rising numbers of unemployed young men, analysts say

On January 20, Prime Minister Karim Masimov instructed the defence, interior and emergency ministries to look into the possibility of increasing conscription into their respective military and paramilitary forces.

In the current economic downturn, he said, "it would be better for them to serve [in the military] to the benefit of their country, rather than join some criminal gang".

Once the respective ministries have considered the plan, it will be submitted to Kazakhstan's Security Council in about two months' time and then passed to President Nursultan Nazarbaev to sign.

If approved, the plan would mark a complete reversal of defence thinking in Kazakhstan. A defence strategy agreed in 2007 set the parameters for shifting from the old Soviet-style conscript army to a tighter, more flexible force largely consisting of volunteer professionals.

Kazakhstan's armed forces, which come under the defence ministry, are believed to number about 70,000, of which 65 per cent are "contract" or professional soldiers. The annual intake of conscripts, who serve one year, is down to 14,000.

Defence ministry spokesman Serik Shalov was unable to give IWPR figures for the additional conscript intake proposed by Masimov, pointing out that the ministries are still working on the issue.

"When we get the figures, we'll address issues of training, equipment, rations and housing. It will become clearer over the next couple of months," he said.

Another defence source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "Whatever the government says, that's the way it will be. We're soldiers. When we get an order, we say, "Yes sir".

Other officials interviewed by IWPR were unable to estimate how long the initiative would last.

In addition to the armed forces proper, both the interior ministry and the emergencies ministry, which deals with the aftermath of natural disasters, have their own paramilitary forces, which are also being asked to consider drafting more men.

Military experts and political analysts have criticised the prime minister's plan, arguing that it will place extra strain on the armed forces' resources.

Dosym Satpaev, director of the Risk Assessment Group, told IWPR that Masimov's proposal was short-sighted.

"The government is now trying to channel surplus unemployed young people into the army, but it has not considered what impact this would have on the army's fighting capacity," he said. "It may be right as a tactical move, but it hasn't been fully thought through from a strategic point of view."

Satpaev explained that as a result of the international financial crisis, the government was going to have to reduce expenditure, including on defence, yet the forces were going to be asked to absorb more men.

Sergei Pashevich, who heads the Military Brotherhood of Kazakstan, an organisation uniting veterans of the Soviet Afghan war of the Eighties, said the army did not have the capacity to accommodate an additional influx of conscripts.

"At the moment there aren't enough barracks to house more people. If this basic problem isn't resolved, we will get disease on a massive scale and other problems."

According to Pashevich, the government spends around three US dollars a day on maintaining each conscript serviceman - barely enough to cover the cost of feeding him.

Marina Nazarova, whose son is liable for military service, shares these concerns. "What will conditions be like in the units where our kids serve?" she asked.

She thinks the government has got it wrong and asks, "Is this an instruction to turn my child into a free source of labour? Why haven't they introduced social programmes?"

Among conscription-age men, the response was mixed - some felt it would be no bad thing to join up during these tough economic times.

"I'd happily join the army," said Ermek Sepiev who lives in Talgar, a small town not far from Almaty. "There are no jobs in the town at the moment, but there [in the army] you don't need to think about where to get money for food."

The majority, however, were against the plan, like Oleg Hvyilko from Almaty.

"I don't have a father so I'm the only man in the family. I'd rather earn money for my sister and mother than join up," he said. "We're not about to have a war, and I'm not about to become a criminal. I'd do better to work than serve my country."

Rising unemployment is a direct consequence of the sudden economic downturn in Kazakstan, until recently Central Asia's economic tiger with huge oil reserves and progressive market reforms. However, its

reliance on oil exports and exposure to international financial markets have left it staggering over the last year, and workers are being laid off.

Satpaev believes tackling unemployment among young people needs a more sophisticated approach than simply taking them off the streets and putting them in uniform for a while. The authorities, he says, should “not just rely on the army to sweep up excess labour resources like a vacuum cleaner, but look at those young people who are in need of retraining and proper state support as they look for work”.

From a military perspective, Pashevich said, “A serviceman needs to actually do something. I see no need to feed and water a useless soldier just for the sake of it.”

Olga Shevchenko is an IWPR-trained journalist in Almaty.

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