

Azeri Street Kids Beg for Change

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The number of kids begging on the streets of Baku is expected to rise dramatically when new social spending cuts are introduced.

A skinny little girl stands in the middle of Baku's main drag. She hardly moves when cars splash her with mud and rainwater. When the traffic lights change to red she moves along the line of vehicles soliciting change.

An electric window lowers and the driver passes her a few coins. The light changes and she dashes back to the middle of the road.

This dirty-faced, seven-year-old is one of a growing army of homeless children on the streets of the Azeri capital. Cuts in social security, child benefit and other state aid currently under discussion will mean that more parents will be incapable, or unwilling, to look after their kids.

"The problem is reaching catastrophic proportions in Azerbaijan," said Alihuseyn Alihuseynov from the Baku police department. He estimates there are over 2000 homeless children in the capital alone.

Four or five times a year, the police conduct a sweep of Baku's streets in a bid to do something about the problem. Several minibuses carrying police officers, social workers and former street kids, scour the streets, subways, railway stations and other hangouts, hoping to offer some sort of hope to the children they find.

Some of them will end up being cared for at the Umid Eri (Corner of Hope) children's home, whose director, Nigiar Mensimli, accompanies the police on their operation.

"You know, these street kids, they don't trust grown-ups, and so when they see young boys or girls they are less likely to run away," he said, referring to the former homeless children who take part in the operation.

Our minibus stops besides the girl on the main street. The children, along with a police officer and Nigiar, approach her. Her name is Gulya. They talk for a while and she seems happy enough to get in the vehicle.

Once aboard, she seems uneasy sitting in a company of so many grown-ups. She looks out in the window. It's still morning and she knows that she won't be able to earn more money today, but she will get warm food and maybe can stay for a couple of days in a warm place.

After a little while, she starts to tell her story. Her mother died last winter when she was six-years-old. She only remembers the day of the funeral. It was cold and she wanted to get home and warm herself by the radiator. Her grandmother was the only one who could take care of her as her father was in prison at the time.

Life seemed to be going well. The whole summer Gulya and her grandmother were preparing for her first school-year, buying textbooks, notebooks, pens and pencils.

"I thought I had riches," said Gulya, her eyes sparkling with childish joy. "And the satchel was very beautiful, with a picture of Bambi on it." Then the smile vanished. "My father was released at the end of August. He took the satchel with all the school stuff my grandma bought and sold it at the market for drinks... My grandma died of heart attack a week later.

"My dad spent all his time drinking vodka with his friends, and had no time for me. I had nothing to eat and was just drinking water. Occasionally, our neighbours would give me something to eat. But it was just for a short while. So I took an empty Snickers' chocolate box and sat next to a shop on one of the central streets and started to beg."

The minibus drove on through the drizzling rain. More children get in. Nigiar points out two boys and a girl and whispers to us. "I know them". She picked them up a couple of years ago. All of them had to be treated for syphilis. They spent some time in the children's home before running away.

Nigiar has 56 children in her care at present. She says she would love to do more but simply doesn't have the money to do so. Umid Eri is kept afloat by donations - mostly from the local cellular phone provider, Azericell, as well as foreign organisations.

It's not just money which is a problem. Often she has to face the anger of parents who have sent their kids on to the street to fill the family purse.

Nigiar knew nine-year-old Mina liked Umit Eri as she would walk proudly around the home with a school satchel pretending she was in an ordinary school. She came back time and again.

But when Mina stayed on longer than the usual few days, at Nigiar's suggestion, her mother appeared banging at the door.

"I was outraged," said Nigiar. The mother was quite happy that the child got food and medical treatment but now she was hungry and Mina had to go back to streets as she was the only bread-winner in the family. Her husband was in prison and her two other kids were too small to beg. "She told me they would die of hunger if the girl didn't come back home," said Nigiar.

At times she is driven to taking legal action - a course she seldom resorts to because of the cost involved. Anyway, it's very rare that cases brought against parents are successful.

A new government commission comprising representatives of different state bodies and ministries has been set up to work out a new programme for homeless children, but UNICEF is skeptical about its prospects. And even the campaign group reluctantly admits that it is not very optimistic about finding a solution.

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