

Bishkek 'Slaves'

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The Kyrgyz authorities do little to prevent the exploitation of Bishkek's massive illegal workforce.

Once the haunt of Bishkek's courting couples, the lovely avenue of Molodoi Gvardii has recently been renamed Mahatma Ghandi Prospect. But it's still far better known to Kyrgyz as "Kulbazar" - the "Slave Market".

This three kilometer-long road is the site of the largest illegal labour market in Kyrgyzstan, and a magnet for unemployed workers in search of short-term or seasonal work. As summer approaches, and opportunities for seasonal work increase, the number of "slaves" for sale is steadily rising. Every day, the avenue is lined with labourers avidly watching every car that drives by, in the hope its driver will stop and offer work.

Kadyrbai, a 44-year-old father of six, is one of an estimated 1,500 strong army of Bishkek job-hunters. He started coming to the "Kulbazar" six years ago, after his career as a truck driver ended when he lost all his documents. Replacing them is almost an impossible task in the bureaucratic labyrinth of Kyrgyzstan - every piece of paper would have required a signature and a stamp, all costing money, and all requiring months of pleading before endless ranks of bureaucrats. It was all beyond Kadyrbai's means, and he was left with no job, no truck, and not a penny to his name.

With no farming experience, and unwilling to get involved in private enterprise, he left his family behind in Naryn and travelled 100km to the capital, becoming a regular day-labourer at "Kulbazar".

Competition is fierce - every car that stops draws a desperate crowd - but Kadyrbai's skills and experience mean he is rarely without work. He is amongst the first to be picked to work on the extravagant homes of the nouveaux riches or "new Kyrgyz".

"At first I was uncomfortable about it," he said. "It's a shameful business, standing around selling your labours. And the name of the market! But now I'm used to it - you have to feed the kids." If his earnings allow, Kadyrbai gets home once a month. Otherwise, he may not see his family for three months at a time.

Some labourers, such as 34-year-old Taalaibek, are educated professionals. He quit teaching when his salary of 600 som (\$12) proved inadequate to feed his family.

Most, though, are emigrants from Kyrgyzstan's southern and central regions and first generation city dwellers who live in large housing blocks on the outskirts of the capital.

Under Kyrgyz law, only legally registered residents of Bishkek have access to education or legal work - most of the day labourers are unregistered and unskilled, and are left with little choice beyond the "Kulbazar".

Employers are happy to employ such cheap labour, especially if it means avoiding the tax inspector. But labourers are less content: the work is hard - unloading stones, menial construction work - exploitation is common, and wages are pitiful. "Two days ago I earned 100 som (US\$2)," said 24-year-old Turat, from the shores of lake Issyk-Kul. "I paid for my lodging, had something to eat, bought some cigarettes, and that left me with ten. If I don't earn anything today I'll end up with nowhere to stay."

Turat's family - he has three children - used to lodge tourists in their lakeside home. There was a plentiful supply of visitors from other Soviet countries, and one season's work would finance Turat's family for a year. Since independence, though, tourists have been few on the ground, and Turat joined Kyrgyzstan's mass of unemployed, most of whom were created when lucrative military contracts for the Soviet Union dried up, and state enterprises laid off thousands.

It's a long way from Soviet days when full employment was sacred, and the criminal code carried a special punishment for "sponging."

Kyrgyz authorities have been attempting to regulate the "slave market" by creating a job centre. This, they say, would protect citizens' labour rights, and - perhaps more importantly - also allow for the collection of taxes.

The ideal location for the centre would be near the "Kulbazar". But so far, thanks to a lack of political will and funds, no suitable home has been found. Until authorities get their act together, the "Kulbazar" will continue to flourish.

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