

Child Miners at Risk in Kyrgyzstan

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In the impoverished south, children as young as ten are digging coal in treacherous mineshafts. From a distance, you would never guess that this small hole in the hill is the entrance to a coal mine. More surprising still is the sight of young children crawling through the tiny aperture to dig the coal from inside.

This is Kok Jangak, a village in southern Kyrgyzstan where children work in dark, airless mineshafts all year round to support their families.

I wanted to find out more, so I followed one young miner as he went inside and hacked out coal.

The mine itself is not a professionally-made shaft, but a hole dug out of the earth in the hillside. There are no props to hold up the roof.

Inside the air was cold. The dark silhouette in front of me walked slowly towards a light shining up ahead. Footsteps and heavy breathing broke the silence.

The shape ahead of me was Rahimjon, a slim boy with a sooty face. He had no safety equipment or protective clothing.

Any moment, the walls might cave in and bury the little miner.

Rahimjon emerged carrying a sack that looked as heavy as he was. He emptied the dark, glittering lumps into a pile, and ran back in to collect more.

Looking at his coal-stained face, it was hard to tell how old he was. His eyes looked tired from his harsh working life and only his voice hinted at his real age – just 13.

With his 12-year-old brother, he has been working as a miner for more than a year.

“We came here to earn money as there are no other jobs,” said Rahimjon.

Every morning, tens or perhaps hundreds of children like him enter coal mines around Kok Jangak. The young miners told me that the several dozen mining squads operating in the area each have at least three to four kids under the age of 15 working for them.

Following the collapse of the Soviet-era, Kyrgyzstan’s once-buoyant mining industry collapsed. State-run mines were closed in 1998, and since then some private companies have moved in to take them over.

Apart from the private firms, there are thought to be dozens of unofficial companies operating. Many locals bypass these firms altogether and dig out coal from makeshift shafts to sell themselves.

It is a dangerous business - over the last three years, more than 30 adult miners have died, mostly from roof falls and carbon monoxide poisoning.

In many households in Kok Jangak, fathers have gone to work abroad in Russia or Kazakstan, and children often have to become breadwinners.

They are hired for mining because their slight frames are suited to crawling through the cramped shafts.

However, they say that even they struggle to fit through the tiny spaces.

"It is particularly difficult when several teams are working," said Farrukh, 15. "When I'm going up with a sack and others are coming down, they have to lie down so that I can climb over them and get past."

Crawling through a coal mine with a 30-kilogram sack is not an easy job, and newcomers struggle in particular as they tire quickly and cannot carry heavy loads.

The children often slip down into holes in the corridor.

"Everyone experiences this at the start," said Rahimjon, adding that on another occasion outside the mine shaft, "My donkey slipped in the river and I lost all the coal I'd gathered that day."

Rahimjon he is aware of the risks involved but says he has no choice.

Although his earnings, worth five US dollars a day, are considered relatively high, the money is still barely enough to make ends meet and is certainly not worth the dangers.

Stones and coal often rain down from the roof of the shaft, but many mines have no props to prevent a collapse, and most children cannot afford helmets or lights.

In winter, boots become essential because the mines become flooded, but even so, the younger miners often have only trainer shoes for protection.

When snow covers the paths leading to the shaft entrances, the miners have to beat a track themselves, and cannot use donkeys to carry the sacks as the way is so slippery that they animals might lose their footing.

Farrukh told me about one of the times he was injured. He was hit by stones, which left a deep flesh wound but at least did not cover him or block him in.

"Since I had no money to go to a hospital, I treated the wound at home. Some people told me to use urine on the wound. I also put on some stinky ointment," he recalled.

Despite his injury, he was back at work the following day. He had little choice if he was to feed his family.

Labouring in these humid and poorly-vented enclosed areas affects the children's health, and many develop throat and lung problems.

Rahimjon complains of a persistent cough. "My mum is worried I might have lung problems. We can't go to a hospital for a medical examination as it's too expensive."

Another boy, Madamin, said his feet became swollen because of the cold. "Sometimes they get so frozen so that I can't feel them by the end of the day. When I go back home, my family prepares warm water to treat my legs," he said.

Ismail, the chief of this particular squad of workers, understands that it is illegal to employ children in the mines. However, he said the kids come begging him to let them work.

"For many, this is a way to feed their family. They come and cry here. I feel sorry for them and let them work."

Most of the children working the mines of Kok Jangak have dropped out of school, and their teachers say they can do little about it.

"These children should be studying, not working," said schoolteacher Gulipa Borboeva. "But the parents ask us to let them work. They have no clothes, no food and no firewood to heat their houses in winter. So they have no choice but to work."

Mehrigul Ablezova, a sociologist from the American University of Central Asia, said the work was alluring for children living in poverty as they could make relatively good money.

"Coal mining is available for anyone who is willing to work there, and that's why the job is so popular," she said.

Ablezova said that to try to ban the practice would not work, so instead the solution might be to regulate it somehow and provide the children with training.

"We have to adjust our system to include children so as to alleviate their working conditions. There must

be changes in the legislation that might perhaps legalise the work, so that children would have rights in their job,” she said.

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Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan
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