

## **Five Years of Struggle**

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The war-shattered economy has prompted hundreds of thousands of impoverished Tajiks to abandon their country.

The fifth anniversary of the Tajik peace agreement should be a joyous occasion, but instead it serves as a poignant reminder of the terrible price paid by its people.



While the politicians talk of five years without war, the public mourns the brothers, husbands and sons who never came home.

"I still cry, I want so much for my husband to be alive," said Zebunisso Nuriddinova, who brought up her four children alone and now prays that conflict will never return to Tajikistan.

The civil war began soon after the country declared independence from the disintegrating Soviet Union on September 9, 1991, and the economy has never recovered from the conflict.

(left to right) **Special representative of the UN secretary general in Tajikistan Ivo Petrov;**  
**leader of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan Said Abdullo Nuri;** **Foreign Minister of Tajikistan Talbak Nazarov.**  
**Photo by Sergey Zhukov.**

International organisations estimate that 80 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Many factories still lie silent and empty, and the standard of health care and education is poor.

Yet the anniversary is a special time for some Tajiks. Muzaffar Zulshoev is returning for the first time since he fled his homeland in 1994 - one of hundreds of thousands who escaped to Russia, Kazakstan, Turkmenistan,

Afghanistan or Iran as the civil war raged.

A former United Tajik opposition fighter, Zulshoev settled in Russia, but the change of scene could not wipe out his terrifying memories. His voice trembled as he told IWPR, "I can still see it to this day. Explosions, shootings, panic... no, I don't think I'll ever be able to forget it.

"But now I am home. Here are my parents, brothers, sisters... and my mountains."

In common with many refugees, Zulshoev worked on construction sites across Russia and carries several photographs of the friends he met there - Tajiks who have chosen to settle in Russia and raise their families there.

Now that he is home, Zulshoev is delighted to see that Dushanbe is free of tanks and armed crowds, but his future is far from secure, as some opposition fighters have been persecuted.

Sukhrob Negmatov had sought refuge in Iran but returned to his family after peace was declared in 1997. His past as an opposition fighter has haunted him, however, and he claims he has met with nothing but problems over the past five years.

"Will it be the fifth anniversary?" he asked. "I don't even remember it. It is good that the agreement was signed and we have peace, but quite honestly I have erased those war years from my life."

Negmatov shares the opinion of many who took part in the Tajik conflict, believing that the whole thing was simply over government posts. Opposition plans to build an Islamic state were quickly sidelined after its leadership received ministerial portfolios within the new administration.

The peace agreement marks an important stage in the country's history but, for many, five years has not been long enough for the physical and mental scars to heal, and Tajiks are continuing to leave their homeland.

Around half a million Russian-speakers have abandoned Tajikistan over the past ten years, and that same number leaves each year to take up seasonal work in Russia.

Dushanbe pensioner Lyubov Ivanovna agrees that the situation has improved yet understands why so many people turn their backs on the country.

"Yes, it is calm at the moment, but there is no good health care or education for our children, and the pension is small," she told IWPR. "Even though the war is over we're still better off in our historic homeland of Russia."

Vladimir Davlatov is the pseudonym of a journalist in Tajikistan

**Location:** Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan  
Stavropol  
Russia

**Topic:** Conflict

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/five-years-struggle>