

Jobless Macedonians Risk All in Baghdad

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Poverty driving young men to take dangerous, highly-paid work in Iraq.

The apparent abduction of three Macedonian construction workers near Baghdad is not deterring hundreds of their poverty-stricken compatriots from signing up for similar jobs in war-torn Iraq.

The Macedonian authorities are currently struggling to establish the whereabouts of the three men – all from the north-eastern town of Kumanovo – who went missing on August 23. Unconfirmed reports suggest that they were captured by a criminal gang, now demanding 300,000 US dollars for their safe release.

While the news has horrified the Macedonian public, it has not dissuaded many unemployed young men from seeking highly-paid work in Iraq.

Kumanovo resident Saso, who has two young children, told IWPR that he saw “no alternative” to taking a six-month contract with the same construction firm that had employed the three missing Macedonians.

News of the suspected kidnapping has not changed his mind. “I must take the risk - and the job - or my children will starve,” he shrugged.

More than 300 people applied for 38 available posts with the United Arab Emirates-based construction company, which is offering a monthly salary of 1,500 dollars – almost ten times the average Macedonian wage.

Macedonia is one of Europe’s poorest countries, with a jobless rate of nearly 40 per cent. Around 25,000 of Kumanovo’s 85,000 inhabitants are registered unemployed, most under the age of 35.

Government sources believe that Kumanovo residents make up the majority of the estimated 500 Macedonian workers who have already taken up jobs in Iraq. A US company with offices in the town is understood to have handled much of the recruitment.

Kumanovo’s mayor, Slobodan Kovacevski, voiced concern over the trend, but told IWPR that he understood the men’s motives. “They can come back after six months with big salaries, and even if they cannot work on their return, at least they have some money they can live off,” he said.

“We would prefer it if these people did not take such risks, but it seems they have no alternative.”

The risks were brought home last week in the most harrowing way. News of the disappearance of Dragan Markovic, Zoran Naskovski and Dalibor Lazarevski had been kept secret for a week after they disappeared, with the latter’s mother claiming that the families learned of the incident through the media first.

A representative from the men’ Dubai-based employers visited Kumanovo last week to talk to the families. At the same time, the Macedonian government sent a special representative to Baghdad to learn more about the apparent kidnapping.

The little information available does not suggest that the workers were kidnapped to force Skopje to withdraw its personnel from Iraq. Macedonia has contributed around 30 soldiers to the US-led Coalition forces there.

“We still don’t have official confirmation about the kidnapping and therefore the three workers are still being classed as ‘missing’,” said Macedonian foreign affairs ministry spokesperson Dusko Uzunov.

Kumanovo resident Mirce Dodevski worked alongside the missing men, and was one of 12 who decided to return home following their disappearance. However, he is seriously considering going back.

“In Macedonia, it would take me ten years to earn the same amount of money I could make in Baghdad in only six months,” he explained.

But his former co-worker Nikica Tomic told IWPR that he now believed the human cost was too high, adding, “I would never return for any amount of money. I will gladly take other jobs abroad, but not in Iraq.”

Lazarevski’s mother said tearfully, “We knew all along how dangerous it is in Iraq as we watched news reports and saw what was happening there, but he decided to go despite all that.”

Yet despite all the dangers, many unemployed people in Kumanovo see it as their only chance to improve their lives.

Saso is reluctant to discuss the suspected kidnapping, telling IWPR that he is confident that he will return safe and sound. “I don’t want to think [about the trip] in a negative way. At the end of the day, many people went there and came back with lots of money,” he said.

His seven-year-old daughter Jovana knows that her father is going a long way away to make money for the family. Saso hugs her proudly, adding, “As soon as I get back I’ll buy my daughter the most beautiful school bag there is.”

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