

Kazakhstan: Smugglers Target Open Border

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Traders circumvent high Kazak tariffs by smuggling goods in bulk along a particularly porous stretch of border.

On the banks of the river Chu that divides Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan, customs officers lying in ambush for smugglers don't have long to wait.

In the middle of the night, a truck with its lights turned off slowly fords the river, grinds up the bank into Kazak territory, and drives straight into a trap.

In the sudden glare of spotlights, a Kazak customs team from the Kordai checkpoint listens as the driver tries to explain away his truckload of fruit.

"The apples are Kyrgyz, but they're not mine - a friend asked me to take them to Kazakhstan, so I don't have any documents for them," he said.

Customs officer Talgat Kirkembaev said, "We already know this story off by heart. Everyone who is detained repeats it word for word. The goods are usually Chinese." In this case, each apple was packed in netting with Chinese characters clearly visible on the label.

The Kordai section of the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border is a smuggler's paradise. There are just 80 Kazak customs officers to patrol a strip of more than 160 kilometres where it is easy to slip through the countryside and across the river, unlike much of the rest of the frontier where high mountains form an impassable barrier.

"Even if you spread out all the 80 people that we have, it comes to two kilometres of territory for each person. And that's a drop in the ocean," said Marat Baibosynov, acting head of the customs registration department at Kordai.

Last year, the customs office at Kordai caught 71 smugglers and this year the number is more than 90, as people make increasing use of the 40 fords along the Chu river to bring Chinese goods into Kazakhstan via Kyrgyz territory.

But those numbers are unlikely to be anything like the true number of people making the illegal trip. "How many times have smugglers crossed the river without being recorded in our statistics?" asked one customs officer at Kordai.

The smugglers choose this circuitous route because Kyrgyzstan, alone among its Central Asian and Russian neighbours, belongs to the World Trade Organisation, WTO, and imposes customs duties of just five per cent - three times less than Kazakhstan.

The differential encourages traders planning to sell Chinese foodstuffs and consumer goods such as clothing and electrical items on the Kazak market to bring them in through Kyrgyzstan rather than across the Chinese-Kazak border further north.

Some suspect Kyrgyz officials of turning a blind eye to the problem because of the duties the government earns from importers coming in from China. But a Kyrgyz customs officer denied that his men deliberately allow the smugglers to slip through to Kazakhstan.

On the Kazak side, the deputy head of customs at Kordai, Alpys Kenjebay, said the problem was unlikely to go away as long as import tax imbalances remained. "Until a tariff policy is agreed upon between the two countries, smuggling will flourish," he said.

Kazakhstan applied for WTO membership in 1996 but currently has observer status with no clear date for accession.

Enterprising businessmen have devised other, more legal ways of shipping goods cheaply without making the furtive midnight crossing.

Valentin, a businessman from the Kazak town of Taldykorgan, told IWPR that while Kazakhstan charges a low customs rate of two per cent on imported consignments weighing less than 200 kilograms and nothing at all for goods under 50 kilograms. So bulk traders simply split up their freight into smaller amounts.

"Like every one else, I legally bring goods weighing one tonne, for example, into Kyrgyzstan, and I then hire five people for a small fee and give them 200 kilograms each. They cross the border to Kazakhstan, and pay much lower customs duties of two per cent instead of 15 per cent," he explained.

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