

## **Kyrgyzstan: Firms Put Profit Before Safety**

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Fatal industrial accidents are on the rise after the government slashed the number and frequency of state inspections.

A growing number of Kyrgyz companies are endangering the lives of their employees by putting profit margins before health and safety.

The republic's labour ministry has recorded 69 safety violations leading to the death or serious injury of workers in the first nine months of this year. Officials warn that the real figure is probably far higher, as many employers conceal industrial accidents from the authorities to avoid paying fines and compensation.

Vladimir Tomchenko, deputy head of the labour ministry's inspection board, told IWPR that many small private enterprises "completely ignore the rules about labour security and safety measures" to save money.

The death of 39-year-old Konstantgin Ustinov on July 16, 2002 was all too typical. He was killed by an electric shock from a home made heating device used for drying timber at the furniture factory where he worked. An investigation later proved that the machine's wires had not been properly isolated.

Ustinov's widow and two children are entitled to compensation equivalent to 20 years' of her late husband's salary - but she doubts that the money will be paid. "I was advised to go to court, but I received many threats when the company chief heard about this," she told IWPR.

Tomchenko says it has been practically impossible to control such workplace violations since the government slashed the number of compulsory inspections after lobbying from private business owners.

The economy increasingly depends on the latter after the collapse of many of the republic's giant Soviet-era state companies, which have failed to adapt to the market economy that's emerged since independence in 1991.

The majority of foreign investors have put their money in smaller private concerns. The authorities, banking on an influx of foreign capital, are now reluctant to control their activities.

A lack of check-ups means that work safety violations will only come to light when it's too late - usually after someone has been killed. The inspection board told IWPR that only the state industries currently observe all the work safety norms.

On August 27, 2002, Pavel Zakhlivnyak died after falling from a crane at a Bishkek factory. One co-worker, who would not give his name for fear of losing his job, told IWPR, "We are given no special protective clothing such as a safety belt, and there is no work safety procedure."

One solvent factory in the Sokuluk region opened without receiving approval from the State Mining Technical Inspection Service, among others. An explosion at one of its sites killed two people in September, and an investigation by state labour inspectors uncovered gross violations of safety procedures.

"If the appropriate supervisory bodies had been notified about the construction of the factory at the right time, the tragedy could have been avoided," Tomachenko told IWPR.

It is alleged that two men hired by a Kyrgyz-Chinese fur-processing venture to construct cleaning equipment were not provided with adequate safety equipment. They were both killed this May after a huge quantity of earth fell on them.

The management has not admitted responsibility for the tragedy, and has refused to pay compensation to the victims' families. It insists that it has no liabilities towards its contract workers. A court case is now ongoing.

IWPR has discovered another fatal accident took place at the same factory on October 14. A young man was killed and an investigation is now underway.

Kyrgyzstan's high unemployment rate has tipped the scales in favour of the bosses. People are prepared to work not just for miniscule wages, but also without elementary safety procedures.

At the moment, employers have few incentives to follow the letter of the law. Most cut back on safety procedures and hope for the best - with tragic consequences.

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**Location:** [Kyrgyzstan](#)

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