

Kyrgyzstan: Morgue Scandal

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Attendants at Kyrgyz mortuaries resort to desperate measures to dispose of unclaimed bodies.

A cash crisis is leaving the country's morgues in a horrific condition and the situation is set to get worse, warn hospital staff.

Overcrowding and inadequate cooling equipment, it's claimed, have left corpses badly decomposed, often prompting morgue managers to dispose of them in any way possible. Employees at a provincial morgue claim that they frequently sew body parts into corpses. "Relatives don't suspect anything," said one attendant.

Workers in Kyrgyz pathology departments blame the health ministry for the crisis, claiming that not enough funds are being allocated for morgue maintenance.

Elderly Jalal-Abad resident Mairam told IWPR that her husband died this summer after being attacked by a gang, and when she came to the morgue to identify him several days after his death, she was horrified by the condition of his body.

"Worms were swarming in his eyes and ears," she said. "They should not have had time to hatch from flies' eggs, so I believe his corpse must have been kept in a morgue without proper cooling equipment."

When IWPR visited the morgue serving the city's pathology bureau, there were 15 adult corpses and the remains of around 30 stillborn children. The cooling system was in constant use but was clearly overloaded, with the result that several bodies had already darkened in colour - a sign that decomposition had begun.

According to Juma Turganbaev, head pathology bureau, only morgues in the major administrative centres of Bishkek, Osh, Batken and Karakol have the necessary cooling equipment, while provincial ones use thoroughly unsuitable facilities such as unrefrigerated sheds.

But even the former often can't cope with the volume of corpses left by impoverished relatives who can't afford to bury them. The situation is worst in the forensic morgues, charged with processing the bodies of homeless people.

Vladimir Solov'ev, head engineer at the Bishkek population service centre, told IWPR that 483 unclaimed bodies were registered in 2001 - a jump of more than 150 over the previous twelve months. This year the authorities have disposed of 500 such corpses.

The centre buries around 60 bodies every month at a cost of around 650 soms - 14 US dollars - per burial, and the cost must be met from the centre's own budget. "If we had the funds that we are so badly lacking, we could bury up to 50 bodies a day," said Solov'ev.

According to legislation, unclaimed bodies can be kept in a morgue for up to 30 days. Any longer and they become a serious public health risk, as the Chim-Korgon psychiatric clinic recently discovered.

"No one came to collect a corpse and it began to decompose rapidly - the smell spread throughout the entire hospital building," said a doctor who together with colleagues raised enough money to hire a gravedigger to bury the body in the grounds of the clinic.

Just as much of a problem is the volume of biological waste products - such as placentas, amputated organs and extremities and forensic samples - the morgues have to dispose of. "In our bureau alone, we receive up to seven tons of biological waste products every year," said Turganbaev.

The problem could be solved by providing each hospital with a small crematorium, but at around a millions dollars each, it is unlikely that money will be made available.

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