

Kyrgyzstan: Uigur Fury Over Market Blaze

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Uigur traders have accused police and firefighters of robbing them during a fire at their market in central Bishkek.

It wasn't so much the fire that traders complained about as they surveyed the smoking ruins of Turbaza market. It was more about the way that police and firemen allegedly seemed keener to extort money and steal goods instead of dousing the flames.

The market in Bishkek is home to Uigurs, Muslims of Turkic stock, living in north-west China, who are frequently targeted by the Kyrgyz government as potential fundamentalist extremists. Some 500 Uigur traders work there selling fabrics and small everyday items.

On the day of the fire last month, stalls closed at 5 pm as usual and the Uigurs went to evening prayers at their mosque in the market compound. When the alarm sounded everyone rushed back only to see merchandise and buildings worth millions of dollars go up in smoke before their eyes.

Just a week before the fire, the market's director Rysbek Kadraliev had told IWPR that Uigurs felt very safe and content in the compound. He said they never had to leave the area because it had its own hotel, public bathhouse, mosque and food and beverage outlets.

The fire raged all night and when it was over the complaints started coming. Traders said firemen demanded money to tackle the flames; that police stopped residents and confiscated their savings; and that residents of nearby Ak-Tilek and Lower Ala-Archa poured in on a looting spree.

Police and fire authorities vigorously denied the charges.

Witnesses said the fire was already out of control when the firefighters arrived. Police and military patrols sealed off the area. Residents, officers and traders rushed aimlessly to and fro amid burning buildings, some of them trying to snatch rolls of fabric out of the flames. Four injured residents, one of whom had fallen in a pool of melted synthetic fabrics, were rushed to hospital.

One trader managed to salvage the moneybox from his stall and was later surrounded by seven police officers demanding his ID. "They searched me and found cash worth about 2,000 dollars," he said. "I tried to protest, but one of them held a knife to my side and told me to shut up. They took my money and were gone."

Another trader said officers stopped the cab in which he was driving back to the market. "I begged them to let me in to try and salvage my merchandise, but they wouldn't," he said. "After some haggling they finally let me through. At the market entrance I saw police loading about 12 rolls of fabric into a cab."

Firemen too came in for heavy criticism. "Are there only three fire trucks in the city of Bishkek?" wondered a trader. He said the three appliances arrived without any water.

Another said some firefighters had demanded cash for dealing with the blaze. He said they would

approach a burning merchandise container, find the owner and demand 300 dollars before they would turn on their hoses.

The chief of the fire brigade, Soyuzbek Akmatov, rejected the Uigurs' accusations. "Our fire-fighters acted in good faith. They did not extort money or engage in looting," he told the Kabar news agency.

Fire department spokesperson Lubov Orlova said officers arrived 10 minutes after the blaze started and did their best to put it out. She said eight engines arrived to find a huge area on fire. "Synthetic fabrics burn like paper. To make matters worse, all the containers and even the hotel were timber," she said.

Firefighters also denied they arrived without any water. Orlova pointed out that the tank of a fire truck holds 2.5 tons of water, which lasts about 15 minutes. When they ran out, they tried to find a local source but the market's water outlets were either out of order or the pressure was too low.

Next day, Sverdlovsky district police raided apartment blocks in the Ak-Tilek neighbourhood to retrieve stolen fabrics. However, locals were skeptical about the prospect of officers returning the goods to their owners. "The cops are never going to give that stuff back to the Uigurs," said one local resident. "When we were hauling away the fabrics last night police stopped us and demanded cash. Those who tried to take a cab were stopped by police who told the looters to get out and let officers drive it away."

The deputy chief of Sverdlovsky police, Meder Temirbekov flatly denied all the accusations leveled against his men. He assured us that all merchandise confiscated from looters would be returned to the Turbaza market. "There are many rumours about this fire," he said, "All these muddy, soaked fabrics are stockpiled in one of our offices. We are taking them back. Let the Turbaza management handle it from here. We could prosecute the looters, of course, but maybe we should thank them for salvaging the merchandise."

This Chinese market has suffered three fires in 12 months. They have been blamed on a variety of causes, ranging from electrical short circuits to arson by competitors and internal strife among the Uigurs themselves.

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