

Locals Suffer in Enclaves Impasse

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Harsh border controls around the numerous enclaves dotted along both sides of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border cause misery for local people

The collapse of the Soviet Union has had at least one damaging side effect for local people in the border region between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Where once it was easy to flit to and fro between communities, nowadays border checkpoints not only span the frontier, but also ring the numerous enclaves dotted inside both independent republics.

The largest enclave, Sokh, in Kyrgyzstan's Batken, is home to some 40,000 people. Although an Uzbek enclave, the majority of the population are ethnic Tajiks. Sokh's "borders" are heavily patrolled by Uzbek guards, police and customs officers.

Approaching the area is an unnerving experience. Kalashnikov-wielding Uzbek soldiers conduct meticulous checks and searches of all cars and lorries. Invariably, a group of exhausted individuals is sat on the ground, detained indefinitely because their papers are not in order.

No Kyrgyz is spoken in the enclave. And in Kyrgyz villages around Sokh, TVs and radios are tuned to Uzbek channels.

Kyrgyz deputy Adakhan Madumarov believes Uzbekistan's four TV stations are deliberately jamming non-Uzbek broadcasts in the area.

"As a result, Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan get their news from Tashkent, not Bishkek, and are, therefore, under Uzbekistan's informational influence," he complained.

Tashmurat Makkambaev, a resident of the Kyrgyz community Ak-Turpak, which borders the Sokh enclave, says the BBC and Radio Liberty are the only way he can find out what's new in his own country.

"We only get Kyrgyz papers when someone brings some back from the regional centre - all our news come from Tashkent, but it's not like we have a choice," he said.

People making the journey in and out of the enclaves are reluctant to talk. Whereas ten years ago travellers of all ethnicities would greet friends exuberantly at such crossing points, now people are wary.

The Soviet built highways are divided into sections, parcelled out between the newly independent states and dotted with checkpoints and barriers.

The Uzbek authorities argue the stringent checks are necessary because Bishkek has failed to halt drug trafficking from Afghanistan through Kyrgyz territory.

But Uzbeks and Tajiks from Sokh often travel to Kyrgyz villages around the enclave in search of farm labouring work. Most were reluctant to talk, but one Tajik, Rustam, says there is a long tradition of men like him seeking seasonal work with their Kyrgyz neighbours.

"Sokh is a large community, but there aren't enough jobs for everyone," Rustam said. "Many people have left for Russia. You can't get rich there, but at least you can earn enough to feed your family."

And their help is welcome. Mamasabyr Baltabaev, a Batken farmer, says the Sokh people work for less and do a better job. "They don't drink alcohol," he said. "We never call Uzbek nationals 'seasonal labour'. They are our friends who readily respond to our call for help at harvest time."

In another region of southern Kyrgyzstan, Osh, the situation is the opposite. Several Kyrgyz communities found themselves on Uzbek territory. One of them, Barak, a village of 627 Kyrgyz people, has become, the locals say, a major bone of contention in border talks with Uzbekistan.

Like other Kyrgyz people living in the numerous tiny enclaves inside Uzbekistan, they have stopped all dealings with the Kyrgyz mainland. "It's too hard," one man said.

Men from Barak always carry two kinds of ethnic head dress - at home they wear the Kyrgyz kalpak, but when they venture into Uzbekistan they feel it's safer to wear the Uzbek tubeteika, skull cap.

Barak council leader Gapurjan Tairov says local cotton and wheat farmers need written permission from Tashkent in order to transport and sell their crops in Kyrgyzstan. Getting the permits takes an age and in the meantime the farmers' produce goes off and drops in value.

The villagers feel unwanted and dispossessed. Health care provision is limited. In this one-village enclave, pregnant women have to make arrangements well in advance to travel to Kyrgyzstan for the last weeks of their pregnancy to be sure of decent treatment when they go into labour.

The local GP, Marapat Borueva, says there are no emergency medical facilities in the village and without the relevant papers it's often impossible to transport critically-ill patients to larger hospitals outside the enclave.

"My daughter had an appendicitis seizure this spring - we tried to take her to our municipal hospital, but Uzbek border guards wouldn't let us through," Borueva recalled. "We did eventually smuggle our daughter across the border at a different checkpoint. We barely made it."

Barak has a primary school, but is too small to have a secondary school. When the border checkpoints were set up it became increasingly difficult for older children to commute to middle and high schools in larger, nearby villages.

In early spring, Barak residents demonstrated in protest at their plight outside the Osh regional government building. It seems this was the first time the authorities were made aware of the village's plight.

Mediation by the new Osh governor Naken Kasiev has brought the villagers access to telephones and a new site has been set aside for a high school. But the tiresome border point checks remain.

Lack of political coordination between the two neighbouring states inevitably deepens suspicion between local Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Kyrgyz who need to travel into Sokh are at the end of their tether with the endless checks and searches.

Tashkent has been pressuring Kyrgyzstan to allot a corridor of land to link the Sokh enclave with Uzbekistan. And earlier this year the republics' premiers signed a secret memorandum which envisaged creating a corridor as "an option" in a land-swap deal.

But the Kyrgyz parliament subsequently quashed the arrangement.

Batken governor Mamat Aibalaev complains the creation of a land link between Sokh and Uzbekistan would reduce most of Kyrgyz Batken to an enclave itself.

Salamat Alamanov, a Kyrgyz government official in charge of border issues, says recent developments have turned around 30 Kyrgyz communities into effective enclaves inside Uzbekistan.

"Travel obstacles are a biggest complaint," says Alamanov. "There are international precedents for settling such issues by means of land exchange or travel corridors. We may be open to any of those solutions, provided they are in our interests. We are currently talking to Uzbekistan about it."

Some analysts in Bishkek argue it is unfair to trade the 40,000-strong Sokh enclave for a scattering of tiny villages in Uzbekistan. They also point out that Kyrgyzstan has not inflicted stringent border checks on Uzbek nationals, even along the main highway connecting Sokh to Uzbekistan.

They urge the Kyrgyz government to take a tough stand against Uzbekistan's policy of planting landmines on land adjacent to Uzbek enclaves and Tashkent's unilateral decision to install barbed wire and armed guards at self-proclaimed border demarcation posts.

Uzbek minefields have claimed the lives of several Kyrgyz hill farmers. The analysts perceive Tashkent's policy as profoundly hostile and incompatible with generally accepted international practices or age-old, neighbourly traditions.

Abdykerim Muratov, a Bishkek-based analyst, says much of Kyrgyzstan's most scenic countryside was given over to Uzbekistan during Soviet times when local and central decision-makers had no idea what they were doing.

"Unlike Kyrgyz with their prevalently nomadic mindset, Uzbeks have been settled for centuries, and know the worth of land," said Muratov. "Slowly but surely, they have been occupying Kyrgyz land."

"The Soviet rulers in Moscow chose to brand Kyrgyz as cattlemen, and Uzbeks as excellent land farmers, so they turned thousands and thousands of acres of Kyrgyz land into water reservoirs to boost Uzbek cotton growing. Although all that land belongs to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan still controls it."

Muratov believes Kyrgyz are only starting to realise the true value of land and with the population in the Fergana valley growing fast, the need to expand living space, primarily by developing new land, will grow too.

Uzbek analysts, meanwhile, claim Sokh only became an enclave in recent decades. As far back as the 1920s, they say, the area was part of Uzbekistan. But when the Soviet authorities ordered all nomads to settle, ethnic Kyrgyz villages sprang up all around creating the enclave we know today.

But while the governments and experts blame one another for this complex situation, it is the local people who have to bear the brunt of this protracted international stalemate.

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