

Migrant Tajiks Face Racist Violence

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An increasing number of Tajiks in Russia are dying at the hands of xenophobic thugs, with the authorities seemingly reluctant to take action.

The passenger train that runs from Russia to Tajikistan pulls into Dushanbe twice a week carrying many travellers, their goods - and the bodies of murdered Tajiks.

According to unofficial sources, 30 corpses were brought home from Russia between April and June of this year. All of them victims of attacks by right-wing thugs.

In April 2002, Russian television broadcast gruesome pictures of the bloodied and bashed head of a Tajik man who was beaten to death by skinheads.

The dead man's father told IWPR that he had not been able to bring his son's body home, as the train did not run at that time and he could not afford the 170 US dollars needed for the airfare. Instead, the victim's co-workers at Moscow's Cherkizovsky market pooled their meagre resources to give him a Muslim burial at the city's Tatar cemetery.

The International Organisation for Migration, IOM, in Tajikistan told IWPR that the bodies of 11 murdered Tajiks were brought back to the small Vanch district in the Gorno-Badakhshan region alone between September and December last year. According to IOM officials, such attacks seem to have increased since the US-led anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan began.

More than one and a half million Tajiks are believed to be working in Russia, driven from their homeland by the years of economic chaos during and after the 1992-97 civil war. Recent droughts, torrential rain and locust swarms have only added to the lack of opportunities in the landlocked state.

However, once in Russia, migrant workers are often met with a chilly reception as people from the Caucasus and Central Asia are widely - and often openly - blamed for that country's high crime levels and economic woes.

Negative stereotypes permeate even the highest levels of authority. The Russian president's representative in parliament, Alexander Kotenkov, was recently forced to apologise for remarks in the State Duma that "Moscow is full of poor people and Tajiks", after protests by the Tajik internal affairs ministry.

However, people here are still concerned. "Why does Russia allow these tragedies to happen?" asked a former doctor who now works as a trader at Dushanbe's Sakhovat market. "Moscow seems incapable of regulating the flow of workers into its country, so perhaps it is being done to limit migration."

As this trader put it, it is the tragedy of the Tajik people that their search for work may lead them to their deaths. However, the unemployed will continue to travel and risk danger if the alternative is facing guaranteed hunger back home.

When questioned about safety provisions for migrant workers, a spokesman for the Russian embassy in

Tajikistan, Andrei Osipov, would only say, "This is a question for the internal affairs bodies. I don't think there is an anti-Tajik bias in our country."

The Tajik people, nonetheless, are wondering what steps will be taken to protect them while abroad. Timur Tabarov, head of the Tajik labour ministry's migration service, said a number of improvements have been made. "Before 2000, migration was not regulated in any way but the president issued a decree the following year which allowed for proper licensing."

The Tajikistan social security department now has representative offices in the cities of Moscow, Volgograd and Novosibirsk, where migrant Tajiks can go for advice and support.

The issue is a sensitive one, as the government does not wish to anger Russia, which has taken in many unemployed Tajiks. President Imomali Rahmanov would not like to risk his people's employment prospects, as many may become restless if they are forced to stay in their poverty-stricken home country.

However, analysts agree that both governments cannot continue to ignore the problem. If they do, it could lead to further needless deaths and the gradual but inevitable poisoning of relations between Dushanbe and Moscow.

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