

Moscow Gets Tough on Caucasian Migrants

In the wake of the Moscow hostage-taking tragedy, the Russian authorities are cracking down on migrants from the Caucasus.

"Every non-Russian in Moscow is a target," said Solomon Khukhashvili, 75, a Tbilisi resident, who fears his grandson, a student at the Russian Academy of Economics, might become a casualty of a nationalist backlash against Caucasians following the recent theatre tragedy.

Khukhashvili is trying to persuade his grandson to give up his prestigious Moscow school and come back to the Georgian capital with his family, and continue his education there.

Migrants from the Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, have come under increasing threat from nationalist thugs in Moscow and its environs in the past two weeks.

On October 31, a group of Azerbaijanis were attacked and badly beaten during a police operation in Khlebnikovo near Moscow. One of them, Gasyam Ajarli, a 21-year-old man from the Shamkir region, died later in hospital from his injuries.

A Russian government source told IWPR that the incident was one of the topics of discussion between the first deputy prime minister of Azerbaijan Abbas Abbasov and his Russian counterpart during the former's recent trip to Moscow.

In another incident, Islam Orujev, a trader at one of Moscow' markets, was kidnapped earlier this month by an unknown group and released on November 10.

The hostage's brother Makhabbat Orujev, a reporter for the Baku-based newspaper 525, told IWPR that Islam had been kidnapped not by criminals, but by the police, who demanded a ransom of 16,000 US dollars for their hostage. "It looks like the Nord-Ost siege has turned the Moscow police on to a rather lucrative business: kidnapping for ransom," he said.

According to unofficial statistics, there could be as many as two million migrants from the North and South Caucasus in Moscow. Living and working here illegally, most of them are completely disenfranchised and underprivileged.

Russia's Federal Migration Service entitles a quota of 530,000 foreigners to legal employment in the country, but analysts say there are twice or three times as many non-Russian CIS citizens in Moscow alone.

Many Caucasian migrants in the capital were alarmed by some of the provisions of the Russian Citizenship Act, which took effect July 1, and the Act on the Legal Status of Foreign Nationals, which became law on November 1.

Under the new migration rules, foreigners entering the country will be issued a "migration card" which will enable the authorities to track all their movements.

Human rights activists have noted that the new law effectively repeals all the migration privileges formerly granted to CIS nationals. While no entry visas are required, the new financial and bureaucratic hurdles are no less stringent.

A prominent human rights organization, the Committee for Citizen Facilitation, has also highlighted the fact that most of Moscow's Azerbaijani markets - one of the main sources of fruit and vegetables in the Russian capital - have been closed since November 1.

"Officially, the move was supposed to combat terrorism, but it's common knowledge that 90 per cent of Azerbaijanis at the markets were just traders without any terrorist connections whatsoever," said Svetlana Gannushkina, head of the committee.

"All foreign nationals employed in Russia are now required to register and pay a duty of 100 US dollars every quarter. Failure to do so results in a fine of 20,000 roubles (approximately 630 US dollars)," Azer Allakhverenov, coordinator of the Migration Resource Centre, told IWPR.

"This way, Azerbaijani citizens temporarily living in Russia will be making the Russian government 10 to 12 billion US dollars richer every year. Only about 10 per cent of Moscow guest workers' earnings will go back to their families back home."

In the meantime, the Russian parliament is considering further restrictions on foreign migrants, including a set of draft amendments to the Terrorism Act that promise to restrict the powers of democratic institutions.

Amongst other things, the draft law forbids the paying of ransoms, the exchange of imprisoned extremists for hostages, or the promising of freedom to hostage-takers in exchange for the release of hostages.

"All Caucasian nationals in Moscow are worried that these new legislative initiatives may fuel inter-ethnic hatred in the Russian capital," said one prominent Caucasian, Ashot Airapetian. "During the siege and immediately after, people like me - those with large noses and black hair - knew better than to leave their homes."

Hours after the Moscow siege ended, deputy interior minister Alexander Chakalin told the press Russian law-enforcement authorities would not target Caucasians. "The interior ministry will not tolerate ethnic persecution," he said, "We have sufficient resources not to let that happen."

Interior Minister Boris Gryzlov said that he had warned all police chiefs they would be held personally responsible if found to be propagating anti-Chechen sentiment.

At the same time, rights activists point out that several hundred Chechens were arrested in Moscow in the wake of the Nord-Ost siege.

The crackdown has alarmed all Chechens. One of the first to fall prey to the backlash was Abdula Khamzaev, a well-known lawyer and former investigator with the prosecutor's office in Moscow. Policemen searched his apartment and made him write a statement explaining why he had moved to Moscow, what his family members do, and what kind of people visit him.

The lawyer declined to give his fingerprints and would not let the policemen photograph him. Khamzaev, who has lived in Moscow for the last 40 years, said he was stunned by his treatment.

"All the terror attacks in Moscow stem from the ongoing war in Chechnya," said renowned economist Ruslan Khasbulatov, a former speaker of the Russian parliament. "I am sure that the whole North Caucasus will explode in a year's time after some Chechen suicide bomber tries to do to the Kremlin what (al-Qaeda did) in America. This will definitely happen unless Putin comes to his senses and negotiates."

Sources at the Committee for Civil Facilitation argue that Russian law enforcement authorities have been too harsh on Caucasian migrants since the Moscow siege. On November 11, it issued a statement denouncing Moscow's police actions and urged the authorities to establish a human rights watch body to monitor incidents of ethnic hatred in the city.

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