

New Year Chill for Azeri Refugees

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Hundreds of thousands of refugees hit hard by Azerbaijan's bitterest winter weather for decades.

"On December 31 our lights went out and we saw in the New Year in total darkness," Samaya Mamedova, who lives with other refugee families in the Yasamal neighbourhood of Baku, told IWPR.

Their only entertainment over the festive period was to hear the president's New Year's speech of congratulations on a radio brought in by their neighbours - though it's unlikely that many of them were in the mood to celebrate as temperatures plunged to as a low as minus 15 degrees for the first time since 1948.

The freezing weather made life difficult for most Azeris, with most roads closed and frozen power lines caused heating breakdowns, especially in the south of the country. But hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly victims of the conflict with Armenia in the early 1990s, found themselves in a much more desperate situation.

According to official statistics, there are at present 779,352 registered refugees in Azerbaijan. Many of them are still living in makeshift accommodation, such as tents, train carriages and student hostels.

They were almost entirely unprotected from the snow, which lay almost one metre deep.

Clay walls were quickly soaked wet and roofs made of iron sheeting were no defence against the cold. Repeated power cuts meant that electricity could not be used for heating.

Most refugees cannot afford to buy firewood and the 30 litres of fuel that the state gives each family every month lasts less than two weeks.

Mamedova works in a nearby bakery and earns 200,000 manats (about 40 US dollars) a month. After her husband died at the beginning of the Nagorny Karabakh war ten years ago, she has had to bring up her children alone.

"The pension the state pays out for the loss of a breadwinner doesn't even cover the cost of food," she said. "I try and do everything I can to make sure my kids are no different from other kids, but I don't always manage. We were offered tickets to a children's (New Year) celebration for 10,000 manats (2 dollars) each, but I've got three kids and that's too expensive for us."

The bad weather - which has begun to improve in the last few days - led to a dramatic rise in illnesses in places where refugees are densely packed together. There were even some cases of frostbite.

This IWPR correspondent met Gurban Kerimov at a tuberculosis clinic in Baku. He had brought his 17-year old daughter from the town of Barda. "We live in a clay shack and it's just as cold inside the house as on the street," Kurbanov said.

"My daughter was diagnosed as having TB a month ago, but we couldn't find the money to get her treatment. But in December her condition got worse, so we had to bring her here to the clinic. I got the money together collecting money from all over the camp."

Kerimov, who mainly supports his family by growing vegetables, said the winter had already hit him hard. "It's difficult to get by when you haven't got anything to sell. You have to go to Baku and find temporary work," he said.

According to Farman Abdullayev, head of the Azerbaijani branch of the World Health Organisation, around 15,000 people suffer from tuberculosis in Azerbaijan, around half of whom are refugees. "The main cause is their poor living conditions, stress and continual under-nourishment," he said.

A United Nations Development Programme report on Azerbaijan, published last November 28, highlights the critical conditions most refugees live in. Their consumption of dairy products, fruit and vegetables is well below a healthy level, every third child is under-nourished, almost a quarter of children regularly suffer from diarrhoea, and just under a third have recorded cases of dystrophy while almost half have anaemia.

The UNDP report also points out that there is insufficient medicine and equipment in the camps to treat these problems and the IDPs cannot afford to buy them themselves.

Faced with the extra crisis caused by the cold weather, Azerbaijan's State Refugees Committee says it set up a special emergency headquarters to deal with the new problems.

"The State Committee is doing everything it can. In the last two weeks, we've replaced burnt out transformers in the Beilagan, Agdam and Geranboi regions of Azerbaijan. There, the situation is generally under control," Gabil Abilov, an official with the committee told IWPR.

Abilov conceded, however, that in the Bilyasuvar region in central Azerbaijan, IDPs remained "in the most difficult position", although he pointed out that new homes were being built for them.

But most displaced families got no special state help this New Year. A state refugee official admitted, "No plans were made for additional supply of provisions."

"At New Year, we weren't drinking champagne or cutting cakes, and our kids have only seen Father Christmas on television," said Kerimov.

Even international organisations were modest in their charity. Just over a year ago, several humanitarian organisations and oil companies gave many refugee families food parcels and held special New Year concerts. This year, the only real help was a present from the All-China Women's Federation, which sent 470 warm coats to the refugees of the Narimanov region.

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