

Passport Chaos in Tajikistan

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The Tajik authorities withdraw a major concession for migrant workers in Russia shortly after announcing it, apparently because of hostility from nationalist politicians in Moscow.

A landmark agreement designed to make life easier for the hundreds of thousands of Tajiks who travel to work as migrant labour in Russia every year appears to have fallen apart at the seams.

The migrant workers are a mainstay of the Tajik economy, bringing in about as much as the government earns in taxes and other revenues.

Under an agreement which came into force on November 1, citizens of each country were allowed to travel to the other using only "internal passports" – a form of ID that most former Soviet republics have retained, as distinct from foreign passports – and their birth certificates. The deal was announced by Russian prime minister Mikhail Fradkov in September.

On November 9, the Tajik foreign ministry sent notification of the new arrangement to all travel agencies selling air tickets to Russia. People travelling by train were not included in the exemption as they would have to cross through Uzbekistan and Kazakstan, and therefore still had to comply with those countries visa and passport requirements.

Nine days later, the ministry reversed its earlier announcement, saying ticket buyers must be in possession of a full passport valid for foreign travel.

The head of the ministry's information department, Igor Sattorov, said the Tajik government had changed its mind after the hostile of certain right-wing politicians in Russia's parliament, the Duma.

"The main reason for withdrawing from the agreement was the inappropriate and ambivalent reaction by the Russian State Duma," he said. "Critical speeches by leaders of Rodina, the Liberal Democrats and other parties forced us to take this step."

Sattorov said the intergovernment agreement did not constitute an "international document", he said, and therefore placed no legal obligations on either side. "The conditions... were temporary in nature and either side had the right to withdraw at its own discretion," he added.

What made the Tajik decision all the more strange was that, whatever outspoken politicians might be saying in Moscow, the Russian authorities appeared happy to adhere to their side of the bargain – which amounts to a major concession for the hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrant labourers.

"Russia's doors are open to Tajik citizens," said the press-attaché at the Russian embassy in Dushanbe, Kirill Saburov, reaffirming that the agreement reflected official Moscow policy on migrant labour.

"As for speeches made by certain deputies in the Duma, this is the normal political process where parties express their position on various issues. I repeat, Russia's position is absolutely clear – not a single

Tajikistan citizen has been turned away at one of the country's airports because he did not have a foreign passport."

But on the day the Tajik government announced its change of heart, many people found themselves prevented from boarding flights at Dushanbe airport. The Avesta news agency reported that about 100 passengers on two flights to Moscow and St Petersburg were not allowed to get on the plane.

IWPR spoke to several men at the airport who confirmed that they had been taken off the flight. "This summer I was back [in Russia] and earned about 1,000 [US] dollars," said Akbar Saidov. "The money quickly ran out, so I borrowed 300 dollars to buy a plane ticket so I could go back and work there. I was happy I didn't have to fork out on a foreign passport, but I got taken off the plane."

Another man, who did not want to be named, said he had taken advantage of the new rules because for the last month and a half, passport officials had failed to process his application for a foreign travel document. "Unless you hand over a bribe, you don't get your passport, so I decided to travel without it. All the newspapers reported that you could travel on your internal passport, but now all our plans have been ruined," he said.

At the foreign ministry, Sattorov insisted that he had telephoned the airport and was told that all passengers had left on their flights that day.

The passport issue is of great significance to the Tajikistan's economy since staggering numbers of migrant workers are involved.

According to Anbvar Babaev, head of the migration service at the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare, more than 370,000 people left the country in search of work this year. All but a few thousand went to Russia - only 2,000 found work in Kazakstan, Central Asia's biggest economy.

The International Migration Organisation suggests that the true number of migrants may be between 500,000 and one million people, depending on seasonal fluctuations. Some Tajik researchers believe the figure could be as high as 1.2 million.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that official records are failing to capture all the migrants. "Go to villages in the south of the country and see who is left there - just women, old people and children," said Mahmud Turdiev, who is a white-collar migrant worker himself. "All the able-bodied men have left to work, otherwise we can't survive. I'm sure that there are about one and a half million migrants."

Whatever the precise figures, the migrants form a huge slice of the whole labour force, which is officially put at 1.9 million people.

Economists say that the money the migrants send home as remittances or bring back in cash is on a par with the government's budget revenue, estimated at 420 million dollars this year. Last year, some 270 million dollars came in through the banking system, and about the same amount is likely to have been imported as banknotes.

A sizeable proportion of the migrants already have foreign passports; over 453,000 of which have been

issued to Tajikistan citizens to date. Interior Minister Humdin Sharipov points out that 3,000 people have so far obtained the documents from temporary offices opened in Moscow, St Petersburg, Novosibirsk , Yekaterinburg and Irkutsk.

However, many of the migrants are working illegally and are thus unable to apply for passports.

"I'd like to get a [Tajik] passport in Russia, but to do this you have to be registered as a resident and be officially employed," said migrant worker Arif Azimov. "For me, like most of the migrants, this is unrealistic. Only a few people who have been living in Russia for a long time have their own accommodation and have been lucky enough to find work at state enterprises can obtain a foreign passport in Russia."

Life has got tougher for all of Russia's "gastarbeiters" since Moscow introduced new legislation in 2002 placing stiffer conditions on all foreigners staying in the country. Some Duma members want even more rigorous controls. For example, Alexander Lebedev recently called for migrant workers to be charged under criminal rather than "administrative" or civil law if they break the rules governing residence and work.

A study sponsored by the Dushanbe office of the Open Society Institute suggest that the bulk of migrants are working illegally, and thus miss out on social benefits and legal protections. As a result, many are exploited, endure poor working and living conditions, and are vulnerable to mistreatment by Russian police.

Jamshed Kuddusov, the coordinator of a project in Tajikistan to combat human trafficking and forced labour, says even those who are working perfectly legally are ignorant of their rights.

"Many of our fellow-citizens don't realise they need to insist on getting the social guarantees that they're entitled to under Russian legislation. Many... who are fully legal do not keep work books, are not given an employment record, and are deprived of rights to medical services and pensions," he said.

"As for illegal migrants, there is a well-developed criminal system to deceive workers, based on blackmail and police intimidation."

Kuddusov concluded that "imposing tougher measures is not a solution".

"Until mechanisms are created to regulate this, the problem of illegal migration will not be solved," he added, noting that Tajikistan lacks the experience that other labour-exporters like the Philippines have built up over many decades.

As long as no provision is made in Tajikistan itself, the government could be storing up problems for the future. If, as seems likely, the country continues hiring out much of its male workforce to Russia, it could find itself with a timebomb as people with no legal proof of many years of employment in either country try to claim pensions and other benefits at home. The labour and social welfare ministry estimates that in 10 or 15 years there could be about a million people who have not paid welfare contributions in Tajikistan making demands on the state's already scarce resources.

That is not to say All the migrants interviewed by IWPR agreed that they are a source of rich pickings for

corrupt bureaucrats at home as well as abroad.

"We get fleeced by everyone," says Yoldosh Kasimov. "In Russia, police and employers fleece us, at home the customs officers, the police again, the passport office and air ticket sellers do the same. Even the traffic police are particularly watchful on the roads at night, when the planes come in."

Another migrant worker, Abdul Vohidov, added, "If you forced these well-fed officials in their cosy offices to work the way we do, 12 or 14 hours a day without decent food or housing, they'd quickly change their attitude to migrants. But we're only of interest to anyone insofar as they can make money out of us."

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