Rising Emigration from Turkmenistan

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More and more people are leaving Turkmenistan in search of a better life elsewhere, according to sources in the country.

The Turkmen government keeps a tight lid on statistics, but an officer in the State Migration Service said his figures showed that over 110,000 of the 150,000 people recorded as leaving the country between January and September were believed to have no intention of returning.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the officer said such people obtained temporary travel visas and then stayed on in their country of choice.

An employee of the State Committee for Tourism confirmed that people often took out tourist visas and then failed to return, becoming illegal immigrants wherever they ended up. In some cases, they are just working abroad for an extended period, while in others they do not plan to come back.

Shemshat, 37, originally from the northern Dashoguz region, is now working as a maid in Istanbul. She sends 300 US dollars home every month to support her two daughters and her parents. But life as an illegal immigrant in Turkey has its risks.

“I hardly ever go out as I’m scared of being caught and getting deported,” she said. “But I could never get a job like this at home. It’s impossible to find a well-paid work in Turkmenistan.”

Travel restrictions were relaxed after President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov came to power in 2007, and emigration has tripled since then, according to some estimates. But restricted categories still exist, for example qualified doctors and anyone deemed to a dissident or even just related to one.

Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and other former Soviet states, and European countries are the most popular destinations.

A senior police officer in Turkmenabat, the main city of the eastern Lebap region, said the provincial government held a meeting recently at which it was revealed that 34,000 people had left the region in the last year. Officials attributed the high figure to the issue of new-style Turkmen passports, a prerequisite for foreign travel.

The police officer said the authorities might respond by restricting access to passports.

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