

## **Smugglers' Paradise on Kazak-Uzbek Border**

**Author:** [Daur Dosybiev](#)

Local officials are accused of taking kickbacks in return for turning a blind eye to wholesale smuggling. Smuggling is now so prevalent on Kazakstan's southern border with Uzbekistan that almost everyone seems to be involved, from villagers carrying sacks on their back to well-organised crime gangs with fleets of vehicles, and border guards who accept bribes and look the other way.

Officials say they lack the resources to tackle the problem, which locals say has evolved from ad hoc activity by villagers into a more organised system involving criminal groups and corrupt frontier guards.

Cheap vegetables are smuggled northwards over the border to Kazakstan, as are ferrous metal scrap which is transported onwards to China where it is much in demand. Kazak flour, which is superior to that available in Uzbekistan, is smuggled in the opposite direction, along with consumer goods which are subject to heavy taxes and customs duties in Uzbekistan.

Illegal narcotics also flow between the neighbouring countries. Afghan heroin goes north, while Kazakstan-grown marijuana moves south. Central Asia's southern republics - Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as well as Uzbekistan - are the first stops on the northward drugs route from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe.

A customs officer told IWPR that in addition, weapons were being smuggled and illegal immigrants were taken over the border.

### **BORDER REMAINS POROUS DESPITE DEMARCATION**

At its western end, the 2,350 kilometre frontier between Kazakstan and Uzbekistan runs through thinly-populated deserts. To the east, though, the countryside is more rural and peppered with villages, and several of the main crossing points- Saryagash, Jibek Joly and Yntymak - are located here, between the sprawling conurbation of Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, and on the northern side the Kazak city of Shymkent. These areas are the focus for much of the commercial trade between the two countries, and for plenty of smuggling, too.

The border was of little significance when both republics were part of the Soviet Union, and after they became independent countries in 1991 it remained largely unmarked through the Nineties.

Formal demarcation of the boundary began in 2001, the first task being to figure out exactly where lines that up until then had only been roughly drawn on maps lay on the ground. When the frontier was finally demarcated on the ground in early 2004, people within the frontier zone were urged to pack up and leave their homes, as it was planned to clear a buffer zone and to fence and secure the entire length of the border.

However, the radar systems, closed-circuit television and searchlights that Kazak border guards officials talked about at the time have yet to be installed, as this IWPR contributor can testify from visiting the frontier zone. As a result, people can still evade border controls and cross fairly easily, carrying consignments of goods to sell on the other side.

For instance, the border guards command for South Kazakstan region reports that its men have seized consignments of flour worth around 90,000 US dollars in the last three months alone.

The number of people charged with these offences – 460 – suggest that they were minor players. Villagers on both sides of the border struggle to survive on the meagre income they make from farming, so the temptation to do a bit of smuggling can be irresistible, with potential earnings of 300 dollars a month and more. The numbers swell from autumn to spring, when there is little farming work to be done.

Local people interviewed for this report were cautious and many did not want to be named, but all agreed that contraband was a flourishing business.

The small-timers work on their own, carrying loads over the border in return for a fee. Most pay protection money to officials or police so that they can work with impunity.

Increasingly, there are sophisticated networks where the actual smugglers are mere footsoldiers for bigger crime bosses with connections to officialdom.

This IWPR contributor met many people who either knew of or were directly involved in the illicit trade, and who confirmed that law-enforcement and border officials were involved.

## BORDER GUARDS SIT AROUND AS SMUGGLERS PASS

To see the trade in action, I hired a “tour guide” familiar with the border. After lengthy negotiations over the telephone, IWPR met up with 40-year-old Nurmat - a pseudonym - who runs a small business in the Kazak border town of Saryagash. He insists he personally never takes part in smuggling.

Outside one village where the border follows the line of a canal, Nurmat pointed out the site where a bridge used to stand, before customs officers and the local authorities dismantled it in an attempt to curb smuggling. The measure had proved rather pointless given that local residents had put up two makeshift bridges a couple of kilometres downstream.

Various methods are used to cross waterways where they mark the border. Some people use rickety wooden bridges suspended a few metres above an often torrential stream. If the smugglers are not local, they can hire villagers as guides. Horses can be rented to ford rivers, and at a pinch a local man will carry a smuggler over on piggyback to save him getting wet.

In one village, there was a border fence in place but local farmers had made a large hole through which an adult could easily pass.

In the village of Yntymak, I watched as a whole line of people ran from the Kazak side into Uzbekistan carrying sacks of flour on their shoulders. On the other side of the border, large trucks were already standing at the ready to load up the cargo.

Nearby, armed Uzbek border troops relaxed in the shade of some trees. A Kazak border guard stood on the bridge about 150 metres away, writing something in a notebook. No one attempted to apprehend the smugglers.

Although some properties have been cleared away and their inhabitants resettled, there are still villages where the traditional houses with large yards face onto one country and back onto the other, allowing the owners to levy fees on smugglers who simply walk through their home.

## THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

In one small village, Nurmat parked his car in a street some 50 metres from a large gate, and we watched as a steady stream of women and teenagers came in and out carrying large bags.

“In this house, one gate opens onto Kazakhstan and the other to Uzbekistan,” said Nurmat. “The owners take advantage of the fact. At night, trucks carrying flour drive up to the house, and in the evening, women cross the border carrying bags. No one pays any attention to them.”

Nurmat said that before demarcation, there were many such houses. “After that most of them were demolished. I know of about a dozen houses like this in Kaplanbek now, and another eight to ten in two or three other villages. But there must be many that I don’t know about,” he said.

He introduced me to 36-year-old Sharipa, whose house lies on the border, and we told her we wanted to take five tonnes of flour to Uzbekistan, where we already had a buyer for it.

Sharipa said she would charge 150 dollars, including the cost of getting her brother to drive the flour in his truck to anywhere in Tashkent.

When we asked about the risk of being intercepted, Sharipa assured us that we would not have any problems. “We are all one under God,” she said philosophically.

“So you guarantee us reliable protection?” I asked.

“Without good protection, I would have gone to prison long ago,” she replied.

Nurmat explained later that Sharipa and others like her bribe officials between 30 and 50 dollars for each truckload they deliver over the border. The higher the rank of the official, the larger the cut they take, he added.

## FREELANCERS PLAY CAT-AND-MOUSE WITH POLICE

Nurmat explained that this system, in which officials and police are complicit, is known as “red smuggling”.

Another method, known as “black smuggling”, involves going it alone and attempting to avoid detection. Although it saves on protection money, it is a risky business as border guards are keen to stamp the practice out since they receive no cut from it, and also need to show their superiors they are doing something.

In the last few years, Uzbek border guards have killed one Kazak national and injured five, while one Uzbek has been killed and four others injured by Kazak guards.

In the border village of Gani Muratbaev, a 39-year-old man called Khalel laughed when he heard that we had only five tonnes of flour to shift. With no police to pay off, he could offered to do the job for less than Sharipa - 12,500 tenge, about 100 dollars.

Khalel and his accomplices are successful by operating on a big scale, moving convoys of up to 20 trucks at a time. There are said to be about 20 gangs of this kind in the area, the biggest of which has 50 members because it takes a large team to move the freight through many hazards.

Ahead of the convoy, three or four spotters drive along in cars or on motorbikes, calling in by radio with news of where the border guards, customs officers and police are deployed on the road. If the lookouts see danger ahead, other gang members are waiting in cars and horse-drawn carts to create hold-ups and obstruct police cars.

At the point where the convoy has to cross the border, the gangs often create a diversion – perhaps a confrontation with border guards at another checkpoint, so that the troops are required to redeploy there.

The crime gangs are said to have lawyers on their books who can defend them in court.

#### COMPLICITY AMONG LOCAL AGENCIES

One customs officer who asked to remain anonymous told IWPR that his force lacked the resources needed to combat smuggling effectively.

“In order to monitor all the sections of the border where smuggling is possible, we would have to regroup our forces constantly,” said the officer. “We have Arlan [a rapid-response unit], but under present circumstances we don’t have sufficient personnel, equipment or weapons.”

This officer suggested that Kazakhstan’s Customs Committee, under its new head General Kozy-Korpesh Karbuzov, was leading the war on smuggling.

Until his appointment in June, Karbuzov was deputy head of the National Security Committee, KNB, which controls the border guards as well as the intelligence services. In spite of that affiliation, he has ordered his customs officers – who come under the finance ministry – to move against the smuggling gangs, and told them they must not fear retribution from local KNB or frontier officials with links to the criminals.

“Can you imagine the level of complicity that must exist if national leaders are concerned about it?” asked the customs man.

Asked whether other agencies were involved in smuggling, the officer laughed.

“This year alone, we identified 12 members of the police and border guards who were helping the smugglers one way or another,” he said. “But there was no direct evidence of criminal acts, so they were simply dismissed.”

He said the scenes we had observed of smugglers walking through private homes to get from one country to the other could be stopped at a stroke if there was a will to do so.

“The owners of these houses lock their gates, and we don’t have the right to break into private property,” he said. “If you put a squad border guards outside each of these houses, ‘red smuggling’ will cease to exist.” “Why don’t you do that, then?” I asked. The officer shrugged his shoulders, saying, “The border guards are very reluctant to work with us,” he said. “They only do something if the command comes from the top. But afterwards, they take their checkpoints away again, saying they don’t have enough people.”

## ECONOMICS DRIVES ILLICIT TRADE

On the Kazak side of the border, many interviewees told IWPR they held the Uzbekistan authorities partly to blame for the smuggling problem. This view is based not on a chauvinist attitude towards their Uzbek neighbours, but instead accurately reflects the effects of the Tashkent government’s extremely restrictive import policies in recent years.

In early 2003, Uzbekistan imposed swingeing customs duties on many types of imports, in a bid to prevent its trade deficit widening. Such regulations exemplify the growing economic imbalance between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the former with a growing economy and relatively liberal regulatory framework, and the latter enduring stagnation under a government that reacts to economic problems with authoritarian measures.

For some residents on the border, the distortions caused by smuggling are harmful rather than a source of profit.

Salim, a 45-year-old farmer who grows cabbages and other vegetables, said he cannot compete with the low price of produce coming in from Uzbekistan, where production costs and incomes are lower.

“Even with customs duties paid, Uzbekistan vegetables are cheaper. But when they are smuggled, I don’t stand a chance,” he said.

Nurmat and the other local residents interviewed agreed that smuggling would continue for the foreseeable future, helped along by local poverty and corrupt officials.

Daur Dosybiev is an IWPR contributor in Almaty

**Location:** [China](#)  
[Uzbekistan](#)  
[Turkmenistan](#)  
[Tajikistan](#)

**Topic:** [Special Report](#)

**Focus:** [Central Asia](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/smugglers-paradise-kazak-uzbek-border>