

## **Tajik Metal Thieves Cause Havoc**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Residents suffer traffic accidents and power cuts as criminals strip transport and power infrastructure.

Murodjon, a resident of Khujand, the capital of the Sogd region of northern Tajikistan, says he almost fell victim to the current outbreak of metal theft that has turned some roads in this part of the country into death-traps.

“It’s become dangerous to drive on the roads,” he said, “I drive over a shaft that didn’t have a manhole cover. The undercarriage of the car had to be repaired. It could have been worse if I had been going faster.”

Since the end of January, manhole covers, underground heating pipes, power and phone lines have been disappearing, apparently sold as scrap metal for big profits in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

The thefts have not only made driving extremely hazardous, but residents of the Bobojon-Gafurov district close to Khujand have suffered serious power cuts during the coldest part of the winter.

Law enforcers have had some success in tracking the culprits, but the long, largely unguarded border with Kyrgyzstan means they are easily able to avoid detection by customs officers.

Some observers believe that thieves are targeting transport, heating and power infrastructure because they’ve completely stripped their usual source of metal – abandoned buildings on the outskirts of Khujand.

The problem appears to have been particularly bad in and around the regional centre. Criminals have stolen 39 metal sections of a fence along the Yubileiny bridge, which connects the two sections of the city, prompting serious road-safety fears. But arguably the greatest concern is over the theft of manhole covers, dozens of which have disappeared in recent weeks.

Police say the metal is smuggled out of the country, and have so far had limited success apprehending the thieves. One recent breakthrough came in a raid on a shop in Bobojon-Gafurov district, where 27 manhole covers were discovered on sale for 20 somoni (seven US dollars) each.

The Bobojon-Gafurov district has also been badly hit by the theft of metal from electricity and communication lines.

In February, police discovered that six kilometres of aluminium wire had been stolen from power cables, leaving local residents without energy for several days at the height of winter.

The thieves also made off with 1,700 metres of telephone line used for railway communications.

Buyers of scrap metal in Sogd region told IWPR that much of the stolen material is coming onto the black market, but said they’re reluctant to buy any of it. “No one will get involved in manhole covers, fences or pipes which are in good condition. It’s obvious that they’ve been stolen, so why do we need these

problems?” said one trader who preferred to remain anonymous.

It appears that much of the thieves’ haul is finding its way across the border.

So far this year, customs officials have intercepted five trucks of scrap metal bound for Kyrgyzstan, where it can be sold much more than it would fetch in at home. Much of the metal is crushed ready for onward transit to China, the major market for scrap metal from Central Asia.

The head of customs for the Sogd region, Akmal Pulatov, says it is difficult to combat the smuggling because so little of the border is policed, “There are numerous minor roads which are not covered by customs posts. You also need to remember that [smugglers also] transport the metal on donkeys or in bags and are completely overlooked.”

Police believe the thefts are the work of individuals rather than organised gangs. “Judging by the cases we have solved, the criminals we caught were not connected with one another,” said one investigator.

Senior officers believe that there will have to be more cooperation between the various law enforcement agencies if the wave of thefts is to be tackled. “Even if we stood in a chain, we wouldn’t be able to stop all the gaps used by smugglers,” said Pulatov.

Bakhtiar Valiev is an IWPR contributor in northern Tajikistan.

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