

Tajik Migrants Face New Threat

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New passport regime may cause further hardship for around a million workers trying to eke a living in Russia.

Tajik labour migrants are set to be hit hard by a new passport regime agreed by the Eurasian Economic Community, EAEC.

More than a million workers are believed to leave Tajikistan every year in search of work abroad, and more than 90 per cent travel using the old internal passport issued back in Soviet times.

Last week, the Tajik foreign ministry confirmed that, from July 1, 2005, Tajik citizens will need a full international passport in order to enter the other EAEC countries - Belarus, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

Tajik Railways has also confirmed that, from November 15, passengers seeking to enter Russia via Uzbekistan after January 1, 2005, will have to present an international passport in order to buy their tickets.

Analysts fear that the new measures - agreed at an EAEC conference last week - will make life even more difficult for Tajik labour migrants, who are already facing hardship, poor conditions and even violence while trying to eke a living abroad - usually in Russia.

As a new international passport could cost as much as 100 US dollars to acquire - in a republic where the average monthly wage is 11 dollars - it is feared that hundreds of thousands of Tajiks will not be able to afford one, and could be arrested and deported back to their homeland.

It is estimated that around half of Tajikistan's six million-strong population is dependant on money sent home from relatives working in Russia.

Currently, Tajik citizens use an internal passport, which is a hangover from the old Soviet Union, where it was used as an identity card.

As travel outside the Soviet Union was difficult for ordinary citizens, it was rare for a proper international passport to be needed.

After Tajikistan gained its independence in 1991, the internal passports continued to be valid for travel to Russia, so few people bothered to replace them.

Musaffar Zaripov, director of the Dushanbe-based Information Resource Centre for Labour Migrants, said, "To allow Tajik citizens to enter Russia only if they are holders of a international passport will further complicate the situation of migrant workers there."

According to him, this will mean huge problems for those already working in Russia, or who plan to move

there in the near future.

“Those migrants currently in Russia cannot afford to come home purely to obtain a new passport, and the Tajik embassy in Moscow cannot help them with this issue,” he said, adding that the documents must be applied for within Tajikistan itself.

He added that according to a current directive on issuing international passports, no more than 18,000 people a year can obtain them, while the number of labour migrants far exceeds the official figure of 600,000.

Unofficial estimates place the true number as closer to 1.2 million – a fifth of the population.

Analysts have voiced concern that few migrant workers will be able to spare a hundred dollars for the new passport – and will choose instead to stay on Russia illegally and pay bribes to corrupt law enforcement officials if questioned, leaving them open to further abuses.

Sangak Saidov, a migrant worker from the Kuliab region, reacted angrily to the news, saying, “I had difficulties paying back the money I had borrowed before leaving for [the Siberian city of] Novosibirsk, and went into debt to pay for my plane ticket out.

“And now I have to think about buying a foreign passport? Where am I going to find a hundred dollars?”

Saidov believes that if the Tajik authorities agree to introduce the new documents, they should subsidise their cost to prevent the majority of the working population from falling into even more dire straits.

Migrant worker Mokhrukhsor Sharipova from Dushanbe told IWPR that she had found the process of obtaining an international passport to be a long and difficult.

“There are many bureaucratic obstacles in the way. First, one has to have an invitation letter from abroad or a travel arrangement and you need to be interviewed [by the visa and registration office] – but the office hours are very limited,” he said.

Some observers note that while the new passport regime has serious implications for Tajikistan and the bulk of its desperately poor population, Moscow stands to benefit from it.

Political analyst Tursun Kabirov said, “Russia has a big problem with illegal workers, and it has now found an efficient means to influence migration.”

He believes that Moscow has been pushing for the new regime specifically to reduce the flow of illegal migrants into its territory from a number of Commonwealth of Independent States nations – particularly Tajikistan.

However, other observers are choosing to see the positive side of the development.

Saifullo Safarov, deputy president of the Presidential Centre for Strategy Studies, told IWPR that labour

migrants would in fact benefit from the new measures.

“The introduction of these passports can protect the rights of our citizens as foreign nationals in other countries of the world,” he said.

Location: Central Asia
Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan
Tajikistan

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