

Tajik Mothers Seek Sons Lost in War

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Six years after the civil war ended, parents of missing soldiers continue to search for them.

Tajiks have an old tradition that before setting out on a journey you have to take a round, flat loaf and bite a piece out of it. The rest is dried and kept at home, and they say it will eventually draw you back. When he left to join the army six years ago, Abdurashid Mahmudov took an extra bite, joking that he wanted to get back as soon as possible.

Abdurashid joined up in 1997, in the final days of the civil war. His mother Bisabokhat hasn't seen him since, and she has scoured the country in search of him. His father died from the stress.

"Where didn't I go? I went to Tavildara, Sagirdasht and Jirgatal," she told IWPR, naming mountainous areas where fighting took place between government troops and the United Tajik Opposition, UTO.

Although it is six years since Tajikistan's civil war ended in a ceasefire, hundreds of families whose sons went missing are still in limbo, not knowing whether they are alive or dead. Mahmudova is one of 75 mothers in the northern Sogd region who have banded together to find out what happened to their sons. They act as a support group for one another, and have organised themselves to go round knocking on doors to ask for help and information.

The 1992-97 conflict, in which guerrillas of the United Tajik Opposition, UTO, fought against the central government from bases in Afghanistan and the eastern mountains of Tajikistan, cost up to 100,000 lives. The army was fairly disorganised and poorly fed and equipped, and the government was forced to recruit heavily from those areas of the country that were firmly under its control – its southern stronghold Khatlon, Leninabad in the north, and areas around the capital Dushanbe. In Leninabad, since renamed Sogd, there was little enthusiasm for the war or for the conscription of young men to fight in it.

The army conscription office for Sogd region holds documentation relating to the 75 soldiers listed as missing. But the parents have refused to collect official notifications that their sons are missing since they refuse to believe they are dead. Colonel Safar Jamolov says there is nothing more his office can do to convince them that their boys are not coming back. The government should announce it officially, he says, "otherwise parents will never rest easy".

"There is no war without losses. I regard them as dead," he told IWPR.

"It's easy to say they're dead, and take away the last hope from the parents," countered one of the mothers, who asked IWPR not to give her name.

Families of missing soldiers are poor since the sons would have been the major breadwinners if they had come back. They are entitled to a pension, but that comes to a miserly 10 somonis or 3.50 US dollars a month, and many of them refuse to claim it because that would be tantamount to giving up.

The authorities have issued the mothers with identity cards that allow them access to officials and free travel on public transport. "We were soothed by these identity cards – just like young children with sweets. But still, not all organisations' doors are open to us. And they won't be able to replace our sons with these cards," said Bisabokhat.

Gavhar Olimova's story shows how it is possible for soldiers lost in the chaos of war to turn up years later.

"My son went off to the army in 1994, and from that time on there was no news of him. They said he died before his military service came to an end," she said.

"I wore mourning for six years and I brought up my grandson whom his wife left with me. But in autumn 2001 I saw him on television, on the news on the Russian channel ORT. He was in captivity in Afghanistan. I was beside myself with happiness."

Gavhar is still asking international organisations such as the Red Cross to find out her son Alisher's exact whereabouts, because she does not have the money to go to Afghanistan herself.

Men like Alisher ended up in Afghanistan after being captured by the UTO, especially as the opposition force gained ground towards the end of the war. Some changed sides, while others were held captive in UTO camps. IWPR spoke to a former opposition soldier, Safar, who said, "We often ransomed the soldiers, or we would send the strong and healthy men to our training camps in Afghanistan, or else we'd persuade them to fight on our side."

Prisoners-of-war were exchanged as part of the peace deal, but some government soldiers were left stranded in Afghanistan. The UTO disbanded its camps, so any soldiers who are still alive may be held captive by some Afghan faction, or may have drifted into fighting alongside one of the Afghan militias.

Mamlakat Yusupova knew her son Muhammadjon was somewhere in Afghanistan because his fellow soldiers told her he had been captured and taken there. He wrote to her recently via the Red Cross saying he was in prison in Kabul.

"If the government helps me get a passport, I am prepared to go to Afghanistan myself to free my son from prison," she said.

Another family, the Azamkhojaevs, had their son come back from the dead. The military returned what it said were Juma Azamkhojaev's remains to their home in Kanibadam, near Dushanbe, back in 1994. The sealed coffin was buried. But his father Aziz would not believe his son was dead, and in 2000, after a long search, he found him living in Kurgan-Tyube in southern Tajikistan. Juma had lost his memory because of a head wound he had received.

He is now registered disabled, but his parents cannot afford treatment for him.

For the last year the Azamkhojaevs have been asking the authorities to exhume the remains of the soldier who was buried as their son. They want to identify him for his parents' sake. The local army office and prosecution service have refused, for reasons that are not clear.

Meanwhile, Bisabokhat has consulted a clairvoyant, and says she successfully made contact with her son. The spirit world told her that he was inside Tajikistan, 20 kilometres from the Afghan border.

"When I told my friends about it, they thought I was mad. But I believe my son is alive," she said.

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