

Tajikistan: Displaced Community Loses Hope

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Families that migrated about five years ago searching for a better life have found nothing but hardship in their new home.

Bishkent seems a place forgotten. The settlement or jamoat - a remnant of the large collective farms of the Soviet era - in the south of the country is worn and tired. Concrete houses, also dating from Soviet years, line the few streets. Some of the buildings are unfinished; others have been ransacked. The walls of the half-built cultural centre at the entrance to the town have long since been removed.

Bishkent residents seem beaten and forgotten too. It is easy to see the desperation and hunger in the faces of seven or eight women clearing weeds and rubbish when this IWPR correspondent arrived in town. Their bodies are thin, their faces pale and tired.

Davlatbegim Chorshanbieva, one of the women, is part of a group who came willingly to the region just under five years ago. About 95 families from Kulyab in the west travelled voluntarily to Bishkent in the southwest, says a local leader Mirzo Jumaev. Some came to escape poverty and high unemployment at home while others left villages that had been wiped out by mudslides.

All were promised land, but today only about 70 of the original migrant families remain.

Those who stayed worry for their families. Their complaints range from the lack of proper schooling, medical services and jobs to the dampness in their homes.

"Our children are ill. Because of the damp in our houses we suffer from rheumatism. Look at our bedding, it looks like it has been soaked in water," said Chorshanbieva.

Life in general is hard. Brucellosis, typhoid and hepatitis are common - and there is little drinking water.

It was not supposed to be this way - only in 2002, the government, planning to settle people here, began to work on town improvements. Little has really been done with this, however.

Chorshanbieva and her community feel stuck. Internal migrants voluntarily resettled from Kulyab and the Pamirs to southern border regions of Tajikistan. But now, many have left, while those who stay hope that the authorities will solve their problems.

"Most of the families who have been able to have left this land, which is unsuitable to live on," said Chorshanbieva.

Southern Tajikistan has seen mass labour migration in recent years, with hundreds of thousands of men leaving for seasonal work in Russia and Kazakstan while their wives stay at home. Many men never return.

Migrants are constantly accused of not wanting to work, although there is no work in the region, says Chorshanbieva.

"We are ripped off at the ... farms and not given our salaries. And if we are, we are only given 5-10 somoni (1.50-3 US dollars). How can you live on this money?" she said.

And health services are dire, say residents.

The district doctor visits patients once or twice a week and writes prescriptions, but people say they cannot afford to buy medicine.

Khaitsho Muborakshoev has had tuberculosis for eight months, "I don't have any way to get treatment. I went to the district hospital several times, but couldn't find any medicine."

There is a programme for free treatment of tuberculosis in the country which functions in several pilot regions of the country. But not in Bishkent.

Talab Podabonov complains that there is no nurse and no first aid available. "I have a sore liver, and there is no one to give me an injection. There is a doctor who services several villages, but he does not manage to examine everyone in time," said Podabonov.

The land is difficult, complain the residents. They say they cannot dig holes for toilets because of the high ground water level. Water simply floods the holes as soon as digging starts.

"If this continues, then soon all the residents will have infectious diseases such as brucellosis and typhus," said Podabonov.

And the place has no future as schooling is bad. Few senior pupils remain, as settlers move to more suitable places to live.

"The most terrible thing is that our children will be illiterate," said Chorshanbieva. "The school has no teachers of maths, literature, Tajik and English. And the teachers who work there only have secondary school education."

One of the few male residents agrees.

"Our children are becoming illiterate," said Mirzo Jumaev. "Our children are given good marks on their reports for maths, physics and chemistry, but in fact they did not study these subjects, as there was no one to teach them. But at university, they will be asked questions about these subjects."

According to school head Bibigul Islomova, there are over 350 pupils at the school and 37 teachers, eight

of whom have a higher education and three specialised secondary education. The rest only have a secondary education. There aren't enough physics, maths, Tajik language and literature, Russian language, and chemistry teachers, she says.

"Because many migrants are leaving, we were forced to close the 10th-11th year classes in the Tajik group, as there was only one student left," she said.

The school itself suffers from flooding and for several years one part has not had any electricity. Despite repeated promises, local officials have not solved the problem, she says.

"There is another problem - salaries. We have still not been paid for December. Some of our teachers are migrants, and it is very difficult for them," said Islomova.

Glimmers of hope do exist. Jumaev says he aims to help people get small, short-term loans, a practice known as micro-lending.

This system exists throughout the country, but when migrants went to a micro-lender, they say they were told that loans were only given to people who had at least three or four cows or other valuables to use as collateral.

"Now we are putting all our hopes in the visit of the heads of the ... region, who promised to help local migrants get out of their difficult situation," said Jumaev.

Someone may be listening.

The recently appointed acting head of the region, Makhmad Sharipov, says he is aware of the migrants' living conditions.

"This place is a sore spot for our region. And as the new head, I see my primary task in improving and developing it," said Sharipov.

"We know that they have problems with clean drinking water, and also with arable land, and that they live in difficult conditions," he said. "The drainage networks here have not been repaired for years, and so it is very damp. A kindergarten was built in the village, but unfortunately it has not been working for several years now."

He says the new leadership has already taken measures to improve drinking and irrigation water for the residents of the region. There is an irrigation network three kilometres from the village, which he says will eventually be extended to the villages' entrance.

"We needed 40 water pipes. We have already purchased them and will soon begin to assemble them. We intend to bring water to the village at the beginning of February," he said.

The new head of the region promises to improve the lives of migrants. Indeed, he believes that they can no longer be called migrants.

"Of the migrants who came to the region in 2002, only a minority remain," said Sharipov. But we cannot call the people who remain here migrants. They have already become local residents, and we should do everything we can to improve their living conditions," he said.

As evidence, he says that the migrants were recently visited by another local government official, Gaibullo Avzalov, who listened to them talk about their problems. On his orders, medicine was delivered to the local health centre.

Also, said Sharipov, the new leadership of the region will repair the ambulance which broke down and provide fuel and a salary for the driver.

In fact, 2007 has been declared by the regional leadership as the year of improving Bishkent, with the aim of turning it into a model settlement, he says.

"This year we decided to plough [the migrants' plots] and also provide them with seeds," said Sharipov.

But this list of promises fails to convince resident Zukhro Arabshoeva, who believes that nothing will change with the new leadership.

"Every year [local leaders] change, but we still don't get paid anything. People leave here to work in the neighbouring Shaatuz region, Dushanbe or Russia," said Arabshoeva. "What a difficult life we have."

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