

Tajikistan: Down and Out in Beshkent

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Families from the depressed Pamir region who took up a government offer of homes and land elsewhere have faced a series of difficulties.

To the impoverished people of Tajikistan's Pamir region, the regional television film showing attractive facilities available to them in Khatlon province must have looked like paradise. They could take their families west and start again in Kabodien or Beshkent and put all their worries behind them.

It was a lure too strong to resist for many families who struggled to eke out a living in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, GBAP, which lies in the mountainous eastern region of Pamir.

Saidmamad Saidvaliev, from Vankal in the GBAP, was excited to learn about the Tajik government's voluntary resettlement plan, which offered a series of incentives to move to Khatlon.

"Over the last few years in the Pamir, we constantly starved," he said, remembering his decision to move his family to a new region.

The deal may have sounded too good to be true - and sadly that proved to be the case. The first group of 125 migrants to settle at Beshkent's Second State Farm, around 250 km south-west of Dushanbe, had trouble persuading the authorities to stand by their promises.

Far from finding good facilities such as those shown in the resettlement film, Saidvaliev's family endured an arduous four-day journey only to find that their new home was a former cowshed, still full of manure and rotting hay, which they had to clear out themselves.

They were moved after Saidvaliev complained to local authorities that the stench was making his children sick, but only to three-room house with rotting floors that they were forced to share with another family.

The poor state of the housing on offer was only the beginning. Two migrants died from an intestinal disease, and a young boy passed away after contracting an infection while swimming in a canal.

Temperatures of more than 40 degrees in the shade caused further misery, as the settlement was having major problems with its drinking water supply, which had to be delivered by truck.

At the same time, the authorities appeared to be in no hurry to provide the promised plots of land, which forced the newcomers to seek work at a neighbouring state farm 15 km away.

There were also extensive delays in paying out the long-term interest-free loans of 1500 somoni (around 500 US dollars) provided under a scheme for housing renovation.

Aside from these problems, questions have also been asked about the suitability of the districts chosen as resettlement areas.

Only two years ago, the government declared most of Beshkent - where the first migrants were sent - unfit for living in and had sought to resettle its inhabitants. The area's main problem is its land, which is too swampy to be cultivated for agriculture.

With the new resettlement scheme, which was approved in January 2001 and is designed to move up to 6000 people into the Khatlon region, the authorities seem to be counting on the newcomers to revive fallow land and reclaim new areas.

The migrants blame the present resettlement chaos on the fact that no single coordinating body took responsibility for the move. They reserve particular bitterness for the GBAP officials who, they claim, concealed the real state of affairs in Beshkent.

The Tajik government has refused to comment on the situation, but a spokesperson for the authorities in Beshkent blamed the delay on the fact that the would-be migrants were holding old Soviet passports, which were invalid and had to be replaced. He added that the issuing of new documents could have been done back in Pamir, thus smoothing the resettlement process.

Sections of the Tajik media have campaigned on behalf of the migrants, and the authorities have now taken action after the publication of articles quoting Makhmud Tolibov, deputy head of the Ministry of Emergency's board for population protection, who accused the local authorities of negligence.

The water hand pump at one of the collective farms was in perfect working order by June 11, and new desks were delivered to the local school soon afterwards. Gradually, the migrants were paid loans for housing renovations and each family was allocated the prescribed 0.3 hectares.

While the promised agricultural equipment has so far failed to materialise, the settlers have no intention of giving up.

"We should get three harvests a year here, and this will let us feed our children better than we have ever been able to before," Saidvaliev told IWPR.

As further migrants prepare to make the move, the inhabitants of the Second State Farm hope that authorities take into account the harsh lessons these pioneering settlers have learned the hard way.

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