

## **Turkmenistan: Twilight Existence for Uzbek Illegals**

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Sixteen years after independence, thousands of Uzbeks from the border districts of Turkmenistan remain without passports.

In a border district of the Dashoguz region of northeast Turkmenistan, local people shudder with horror as they recall the time last spring when the police came to take away their families.

Some families were split in two, as police bundled women and children into vans and drove them to the border, leaving their tearful husbands behind.

In some villages, police stormed into classrooms and seized children for instant deportation, without offering an explanation

The reason for the crackdown was not politics but ethnicity. All the deportees were ethnic Uzbeks, living in Turkmenistan without passports and the appropriate registration.

Members of the community have failed to acquire legal status over the years out of fear of officialdom and poor knowledge of the law. For years, their status went more or less unnoticed.

But this has changed recently, after the Turkmen government intensified a drive to make sure all the inhabitants in the northern Dashoguz region bordering Uzbekistan have the right to live there.

Officials hasten to say they are not persecuting the Uzbeks and insist that if they apply for citizenship, their problems will be solved.

But many ethnic Uzbeks are still not unwilling to follow official recommendations and declare their presence. Though most hold only Uzbek or old Soviet passports, they fear being deported and very few have submitted written requests for citizenship.

### TRICKED INTO LEAVING

Local people in Dashoguz say that in many of the cases last year, the ethnic Uzbeks were tricked into leaving the country without a fuss.

“The illegal women and their children were uncovered through a kind of ruse,” one employee of the local passport office told IWPR. “The district police officer would visit houses where he believed women without Turkmen passports lived and say it had been decided to give them documents and legal status.

“They believed this and were happy to go with [the policeman] to obtain a passport, but then they were deported to Uzbekistan on the spot.”

In Uzbekistan, the deportees often faced difficulties as many had always lived in Turkmenistan and had no relatives on the other side of the border.

“These women are unfortunate,” one 65-year-old Uzbek woman said. “They go back to their homeland but no one is waiting for them,” she added.

## LIVING UNDER THE SHADOW OF SUSPICION

Uzbeks have been living in the northern Dashoguz and eastern Lebap regions of what is now Turkmenistan for generations. In 1924, the Soviet authorities assigned these lands to the newly formed republic of Turkmenistan.

Until the Russian Revolution, Dashoguz was subject to the Khanate of Khiva while Lebap was within the sphere of influence of the Emir of Bukhara - both cities in present-day Uzbekistan. Despite the imposition of borders, the ethnic boundaries remain blurred, with more than 400,000 Uzbeks living in Turkmenistan, making up 12 per cent of the population. Meanwhile, more than 150,000 ethnic Turkmen live in Khorezm, Surkhandarya and Karakalpakstan, all in Uzbekistan.

For those who have family on the other side of the border, maintaining the link has become more difficult as relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have deteriorated.

Ties between Ashgabat and Tashkent fell to an all-time low in November 2002 after a failed assassination attempt on the then Turkmen president, Saparmurat Niazov. The Turkmen authorities accused an Uzbek diplomat of aiding the terrorists and harbouring the main accused, Boris Shikhmuradov, inside the Uzbek embassy.

The souring of diplomatic relations led to the Uzbek minority being regarded with greater suspicion.

“From that moment on, Niazov developed a strong dislike of all Uzbeks,” a journalist in Ashgabat told IWPR. “The authorities imposed restrictions on their trips across the border and increased the limitations placed on them.”

Many prominent Uzbeks were sacked from official posts and ended up in jail 2003 and 2004.

“All Uzbeks were gradually removed from their positions and discharged from the law-enforcement and the secret services,” a lawyer in Turkmenistan said.

As ethnic Uzbek leaders lost their jobs or were jailed, the entire community sank into despondency.

“It was as if the ground had been cut from under their feet,” recalled one local observer in Turkmenistan.

There was a brief thaw between Ashgabat and Tashkent in May 2004, following a bilateral agreement under which Turkmenistan gained sovereignty over 18,000 hectares of land which Uzbekistan had effectively leased to it when both republics were still part of the Soviet Union. The ethnic Uzbeks living there held nationality in Uzbekistan, and Niazov made it clear they should either acquire Turkmen passports or leave. (See **Turkmenistan’s “Foreign” Uzbeks**, RCA No. 296, 24-Jun-04.)

In August 2005, ahead of a hearing by a United Nations committee looking at ethnic discrimination in Turkmenistan, Niazov signed a decree granting citizenship to this group.

But he made it clear this was an exceptional case. “Under no circumstances does this mean that our doors are wide open to everyone,” he said. Citizenship, he added, would be offered “only when people from neighbouring and other countries come here in really difficult situations”.

As a result, most of the ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan remained in the same limbo as before regarding citizenship.

“Some did not want to lose the citizenship of their historical homeland,” said the lawyer. “Others did not apply for citizenship because they lacked knowledge of the law and would have needed to collect many documents and take their applications to the interior ministry – an institution widely associated with arrests and corruption.”

The most recent phase of harassment of the Uzbek minority began during the final years of Niazov’s autocratic rule.

In mid-April 2006, for example, police suddenly seized 40 Uzbeks by force from the border farming settlements of Gulistan, Dovletli and Maylijengel.

Eyewitnesses said they were put into lorries and taken away under police escort.

“These people were neither jailed nor deported but sent to uninhabited steppes, where they found tumbledown buildings that had once belonged to Kazaks who long ago left for their homeland,” a former policeman who took part in this action told IWPR.

The authorities later said these people had been resettled far away from the Uzbek border because they had been smuggling petrol, cottonseed oil and other products out of Turkmenistan.

Fatima is one of the lucky ones. This ethnic Uzbek woman, 28, from the Lebap region, along with her son, is now a citizen of Turkmenistan.

She not only obtained Turkmen citizenship but also changed her “nationality”, the official designation of a person’s ethnicity, in order to avoid possible discrimination in future.

“Many Uzbeks have obtained documents with their names and surnames changed from Uzbek into Turkmen ones - and that’s what I’ve done, too,” Fatima explained.

The Uzbek surname Khudaybergenov looks more Turkmen if it is changed to Khudayberdyev, while the Uzbek name Maksud can become the Turkmen Maksat.

Uzbek women who marry Turkmen men can easily change their surnames and national identity. Children born from mixed marriages also have an automatic right to Turkmen citizenship.

But Uzbeks like Fatima still remain in the minority. Fearful of harassment and repression, most avoid dealing with officialdom and applying for citizenship. “They are very passive,” said one observer in Turkmenabat, capital of the Lebap border region.

Sadulla-Aga, 70, a resident of the Gulistan collective farm, has two sons married to wives who originally came from Khorezm region in Uzbekistan. He says he had great difficulties two years ago when seeking passports for his three eldest grandsons, because their mother was not a Turkmen citizen.

“My son and his wife never registered their marriage and she never switched her old Soviet passport to a new one and so she has been living without citizenship papers for years,” he said.

The head of the civil registry office in one of border areas of Dashoguz region told IWPR that ethnic Uzbeks often let matters drift for too long.

“Some people are highly irresponsible and do not even obtain birth certificates for their kids for years - and then they want to apply for citizenship,” she complained.

Tajigul Begmedova, a chair of the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation, an émigré human rights group, agrees that the Uzbeks lose out by maintaining a low profile.

“We receive complaints from people who have had difficulties in getting citizenship,” she said. “But when

we ask why they never applied to the courts, they reply that they do not believe the courts are fair and are sure it would be fruitless.”

Turning a fearful and marginalised minority into active citizens may not be easy.

Observers note the low literacy level of many people on the border and their lack of awareness of their basic rights. On top of that, qualified legal help is hard to come by in these regions.

For example, few Uzbeks seem aware that they are qualified to apply for citizenship after seven years' residence in Turkmenistan.

As a result, the more affluent waste money by paying 500 US dollars to renew their Turkmen visa every year and register with the country's Migration Service.

“Several times I asked the staff of the Migration Service how long I needed to live in Turkmenistan as a foreign citizen [before applying for a passport] but they said they didn't know,” one young Uzbek complained to IWPR.

“It's not difficult for us to prove we were born and live in this country,” a local Uzbek businessman said. “Why don't they finally recognise us as citizens?”

A lawyer from Dashoguz told IWPR that few people had much faith in the law in Turkmenistan as a consequence of Niazov's dictatorial rule.

Before Niazov's sudden death in December 2006, he went on, the law had little meaning and everything depended on the whim of one man.

“The president always decided at his own discretion who could become a citizen of his country and who could not,” noted the lawyer.

“In those years, there was a media slogan that ran, ‘The word of the president is the law’,” recalled a journalist from Ashgabat. “This made it clear that the written, printed, law was not obligatory and Niazov's word was enough.”

Niazov died in December 2006, and for the last year Turkmenistan has seen faltering changes under its new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov.

The IWPR source in the Turkmen registry office agreed that it would take years to re-awaken a society out of the hibernation it entered into under Niazov, and to train “officials and ordinary people to observe the laws”.

“We don’t have any concrete instructions or written orders,” she reflected. “For us, orders come in the shape of a telephone call from the regional department, giving us instructions on each occasion.”

(The names of interviewees have been changed out of concern for their security.)

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