

Uzbek Drought

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Thousands are leaving the northern region of Karakalpakstan, as water supplies dry up for the second year running.

"It hurts to look out over these scorched, barren fields that were once so bountiful, giving us rice, watermelons and golden wheat," laments Azamat Bayatanov. "Nothing grows here anymore. The wells have dried up and the orchards have withered away. Life is impossible here, we have to leave."

Bayatanov, now retired, will join a wave of migrants from the autonomous province of Karakalpakstan on a quest for water and a better life as a second year of drought devastates the area.

According to Ecosun, the international environmental watchdog, the region's water source, the Amudaria, has brought just a fifth its usual amount of water to Karakalpakstan.

The drought has devastated the economy of this traditional farming region of 1.5 million people. The region's nine northern districts have produced no rice in two years and cotton farming is down by more than a third. The biggest problem is that half of the population in the north lacks clean drinking water.

In recent years, water has been in short supply all over Central Asia, but in Karakalpakstan the situation is exacerbated by the ongoing environmental disaster caused by the slow, lingering death of the Aral Sea - a process begun more than 30 years ago.

Ecosun indicates the Aral Sea has shrunk to a quarter of its size in that time destroying innumerable species of plants and animals as well as devastating fish stocks and consequently a once thriving fishing industry. Thousands have lost their livelihoods.

When the most pessimistic forecasts of further drought proved correct early this summer, entire villages began leaving northern Karakalpakstan. They join 50,000 people from the Aral Sea area who migrated to Kazakhstan in Nineties.

Kazakhstan is a favoured destination as the country shares the same language and customs. Its economy is also in far better shape than that of the crippled north of Uzbekistan, where private businesses are folding and public sector wage backlogs are enormous.

To some extent the Karakalpakstani view of Kazakhstan as a land of opportunity is justified - they need no visa to enter the country, jobs are easier to come by and pay considerably more than at home. But that could change - Kazak experts are predicting imminent problems in the republic's employment market due to the influx of cheap foreign labour.

In Karakalpakstan, however, the local authorities stubbornly deny that people are leaving in droves. Abdulla Saburov, acting Karakalpakstani minister of employment and social security, was quoted recently as saying there is nothing unusual about people leaving Karakalpakstan; they've been doing it for decades, and all speculations about a mass exodus are no more than media hype.

But demographers warn that people will have no option but to leave the area en masse with worsening shortages of water for drinking and irrigation especially in the hardest hit districts of Takhtakupyr, Kungrad, Muinak, Kegeily and Karauzak districts.

Another favoured destination for migrants are the shantytowns of the region's administrative centre Nukus - impoverished refuges for people like pensioner Kylychbek Kurbantaev, who has been living without gas or water in an improvised shack for two years now.

"I moved here from the Takhtakupyr District in 1999 when things got really nasty there," recounts Kylychbek, "Our canal became too shallow even to grow alfalfa or corn to feed our sheep. The old well dried up completely. We just couldn't do it anymore, so we sold our last two cows and left. My wife and I have seven kids. This place is terrible. We live in a shack and we have to haul water from a well two streets away, but it's way better than back home in Takhtakupyr."

Residents of the city's Oi Aul shantytown don't even have wells and live under the poisonous fallout of nearby marble and brick factories.

Social workers believe conditions are unlikely to improve as the residents are caught in a vicious circle - they never ask the local authorities for anything, either because they don't believe they'll get anywhere or because previous demands have gone ignored, while the local authorities believe they are doing the shanty-town dwellers a favour just allowing them to set up home illegally.

Nukus is however beginning to feel the adverse consequences of overpopulation. The labour market is oversubscribed, social tensions are rising, crime is on the increase and the threat of epidemics is ever-present.

Economic recovery is clearly critical if Karakalpakstan's mounting problems are to be reversed and the out-flow of people halted. But the continuing drought and the irreversible environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea has robbed the region of any hope of recovery.

Olga Romanova is a pseudonym of a journalist in Karakalpakstan.

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