

Uzbekistan: Border Guards Aid Smugglers

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Uzbek border guards and customs officials collude in widespread smuggling.

In the village of Lugumbek, five km inside the Uzbek frontier, border guards conduct daily searches of every house and garden looking for contraband cotton. Three tons of the crop were found recently in one villager's yard.

Locals smuggle the so-called "white gold" across the border into Kyrgyzstan, where

one kilo can be sold for around 20 times more than it would fetch in Uzbekistan.

It's a booming business. Although there are check-points on both sides of the frontier, many border guards can be easily bribed. Some of the criminals part with up to 25 per cent of their profits to secure their illegal trade.

The corrupt frontier guards and customs officials, who incidentally are rarely caught, make most of their money from those who make regular trips back and forth to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, Russia and China.

Uktam, a young sergeant in the border service, says he has earned about 1 million sum (800 US dollars) from kickbacks during his tour of duty. He is soon to be demobbed.

"After army service, I'll stay on here as a contract soldier," Uktam said. "If I 'work' for another year, I can buy myself a good house."

"If Tashkent wanted to stop the trade it should put up the price of cotton," said one Uzbek smuggler. "Our neighbours have very high prices for the crop so it's only economic common sense to take it there to sell."

The man had been arrested trying to smuggle cotton down river in cellophane bags. He said he was picked up because he was not "on the list" of favoured traffickers and was using an unusual route.

Akramjon Batyrov, a guard at the Madaniyat post on the Kyrgyz frontier, said the main smuggling activity takes place at night - with bribes determined by the size of consignments.

Batyrov said the local commander usually goes off to bed early, allowing the soldiers the opportunity "to earn". They divide up the takings in the morning.

According to sources within the border guard units, soldiers have to pay a bribe of up to 1,300 dollars to get a lucrative frontier posting. Taking senior officers out for a suitably lavish banquet also helps.

When asked if it took long to earn back the army pay off, one frontier soldier boasted that's it took him just under a month to do so.

Former guard officer, Babur Rakhmanov, retired after two years working in a border unit, having made enough from bribes in that time to live in comfort for the rest of his life. He now has several cars and now runs a number of businesses.

Batyrov had been making a packet from kickbacks and was planning to buy a new car. But he fell out with a senior officer and was assigned to other duties - although he's confident of getting his old job back.

"In one week I could earn at least 45,000 to 50,000 sum," Batyrov said. "I've just been back to my home. My parents are going to go to my commander and invite him to a banquet, give him a little money. I think that after that he'll put me back at my post."

Given the extent of corruption, the worry must be that weapons and narcotics could also find their way across the frontier. The leader of the rebel Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Juma Namangani, who is believed to have died in fighting in Afghanistan, once praised Uzbek border guards for allowing him to pass unmolested.

Corruption among border forces, especially along the Uzbek-Afghan frontier, poses a serious security risk to the country. Guards here said a person could pass unchallenged into Afghanistan for 150 dollars and return for 200 dollars. Those prices have escalated since the beginning of the "war on terrorism".

(The names of people quoted in this article have been changed to protect their identity.)

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