

## **Uzbekistan Cold-shoulders Refugees**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

The Uzbek government claims it cannot afford to grant refugees even the most basic civil rights

Refugees fleeing the Afghan war and poverty-stricken Tajikistan can expect a frosty reception in neighbouring Uzbekistan.

"The air here is the same as in my native Mazar-i-Sharif," said one newly arrived Afghan delightedly -- but his joy was short-lived. Most refugees quickly discover that life across the border is one of grinding poverty and constant police harassment. Here they are personae non grata, caught between the devil and deep blue sea.

In contrast to the other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan has not signed a convention drawn up by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in 1951 and refuses to recognise refugee status.

Consequently, all displaced people are illegal immigrants who can be arrested or deported at any time - especially in the current atmosphere of official paranoia inspired by the terrorist bomb attacks of 1999 and the recent Islamic militant activity on the Uzbek border.

"Who can guarantee that there are no terrorists or religious extremists amongst the refugees?" said Akhtam Tursunov, chairman of Uzbekistan's defence and security committee. "In general, we're not against signing [the UN convention] but we want to know what kind of people are in our country and what they're doing here."

The government also argues that, against the backdrop of severe economic hardships, it has few resources to spare for unwanted guests.

Currently, the refugees' only hope of salvation is the UNHCR office in Tashkent. Opened in 1993, the branch office is committed to protecting the rights of Uzbekistan's refugees as well as granting them official refugee status.

The UNHCR representation also provides some medical help and small subsidies for the most vulnerable displaced people.

Over the past year, the Tashkent office has provided documentation to 1,035 people - 1,031 Afghans, three Azerbaijanis and one Tajik.

However, the UNHCR papers are not recognised by the Uzbek government and offer the refugees almost no legal rights. In the past, bearers have been jailed by the police and only released after the commission interceded on their behalf.

Nor does refugee status give the bearer the right to work in Uzbekistan where unemployment is currently at an all-time high.

Farahnaz Abdul Kabir fled Kabul in 1995. "We didn't think the Taleban would survive for long," she said. "That's why we decided to settle in neighbouring Uzbekistan in the hope that we'd be able to return in the near future."

However, Kabir and her five children have been forced to remain in the former Soviet republic while her husband has returned to Afghanistan in search of work.

Like most Afghan refugee families, they live in abject poverty, surviving mainly on meagre handouts from the UNHCR. "We have to find the money ourselves for rent and communal services," said Kabir who hopes the UNHCR will eventually be able to relocate her family to another country.

Charlotte Altenhoner, a legal advisor for the high commission, says that, although Uzbekistan has not signed the 1951 convention, it is obliged to protect the rights of refugees according to international protocol.

In addition, under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Uzbekistan has signed a number of agreements aimed at "helping refugees and displaced persons as well as the victims of armed conflicts".

To find long-term solutions to the refugee problem, the UNHCR also works to repatriate refugees or find them a temporary home in other countries.

Between 1998 and 1999, the commission helped to repatriate around 5,000 refugees who fled Tajik civil war. The Tashkent office expects to find alternative accommodation for another 130 by the end of this year.

The UNHCR also works closely with a range of government agencies and NGOs. A joint initiative with the Uzbek government has given refugee children the opportunity to study in local schools.

And the NGO, Khaet Yollari (Roads of Life), runs free courses to teach Afghan children their native languages - Dari and Pushtu - as well as Russian, English and Uzbek.

Despite the host of problems which face refugees in Uzbekistan, the former Soviet republic still continues to be a destination of choice for hundreds of displaced people. According to recent UNHCR figures, a further 1,124 immigrants have applied for refugee status in recent months, including 602 Afghans, 509 Tajiks, 10 Azerbaijanis, two Bosnians and one Russian.

Umo Azizi, an Afghan from Kabul, says that she feels at home in Uzbekistan. "Here I don't feel that I am far from my homeland," she explained. "The Uzbeks are very hospitable and the bazaars are full of fresh fruit and vegetables all year round.

" But the state will never recognise us. It won't give us Uzbek passports and my children are growing up. Soon they should be studying and finding work. We are considering moving on."

Manzura, a local Uzbek, commented, "It's hard enough for the Uzbek population here and our state doesn't care about us. So what hope can there be for refugees from abroad?"

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