

Uzbeks Angered Over Border Restrictions

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Uzbeks are banned from travelling to Turkmenistan after tragic border incident

When the neighbouring states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were 'brother republics' in the Soviet Union, there were no travel restrictions along their border. Times have changed, though. Now, people are getting killed crossing from one side to the other.

Late last month, Turkmen border guards opened fire on Uzbek brothers, Rashid and Nuratdin Matkurbanov, killing the former and wounding the latter. The incident occurred close to the Dustlik collective farm in the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan.

Tashkent's acknowledged that the two men had crossed illegally, but protested over the guards' excessive use of force.

The brothers were going to Turkmenistan to stock up on petrol as they had done a hundred times before. They made money smuggling gasoline from Turkmenistan.

Nuratdin says the guards shot them as they were crossing back into Uzbekistan on their motorcycle, laden with canisters of fuel.

"We almost made it but then our money bag fell off the motorbike, so we had to drive back to pick it up," he said. "All of a sudden, one of the guards opened fire. He shot Rashid, who died instantly. Then they started shooting me. They got me in the arms and the stomach. I ran, but they chased me well into Uzbek territory."

Nuratdin is still in a hospital. Rashid's body was returned to Uzbekistan the following day. The brothers' family is furious. Their grieving mother, Jumagul Matkurbanova, flung herself in protest against the barbed wire fence that Turkmenistan installed last spring along its side of the border.

The local Uzbek authorities have tried to hush up the incident and have agreed to try to prevent Uzbeks crossing the border.

Customs and tax authorities were instructed to stop petrol dealers from bringing in their merchandise from Turkmenistan. Traffic police were ordered to impound motorcycles belonging to residents in the border zone.

Local government officials exhorted the brothers' relatives to forget about the incident and to come to terms with Rashid's death. His relatives say they are in a difficult situation, caught between the ruthlessness of their neighbouring state and the indifference of their own authorities. Indeed, Uzbekistan has done little to protect its citizens and seems more intent on curbing cross-border trade.

For most residents of Khorezm, however, this trade is the only means of survival. "Unemployment and poverty compels our children to crawl under barbed wire," said Jumagul Matkurbanova, with tears in her eyes. "They are risking their lives every day they cross the Turkmen border."

Her sons fell victim to both governments' security concerns. While Ashgabad has gone furthest by putting up a barbed wire fence, both states have demarcated their frontiers and introduced visa requirements.

Abdy Kuliev, former Turkmen foreign minister, believes the restoration of good relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will take time and some major democratic changes. "As long as both are ruled by dictators," he said, "these nations will be drawn ever wider apart. The policy of their rulers leaves them no choice."

Ordinary people have now lost their cross-border business. Barbed wire has been thrown between close relatives. To visit each other, people have to pay for a visa. The inhabitants of the frontier regions are nostalgic for a time when life was quieter, safer and more affluent.

Sharipboi Yakubov, 74, has been in the gardening business for 60 years. The border runs through his backyard. His fruit orchard, wheat and rice fields are on the other side of a barbed wire fence.

"I lost my harvest and I lost my market," the old man complained. "I've always sold my fruit and vegetables in Turkmenistan. I can't even go see my kin there anymore."

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