

Uzbeks Face High Risks as Migrant Workers

Author: [News Briefing Central Asia](#)

High unemployment levels and poverty are forcing many people in Uzbekistan to seek work in Kazakhstan and Russia, where they are vulnerable to exploitation.

Local human rights groups estimate that somewhere between three and five million of Uzbekistan's population of 28 million are working abroad in Russia, Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates and South Korea. Tracking the numbers is hard because the Uzbek authorities do not acknowledge that labour migration is widespread.

Many enter the host country illegally, and therefore do not qualify for benefits or healthcare. Working conditions can be grim, and workers are sometimes mistreated by employers.

A businessman in southern Kazakhstan who hires Uzbek labourers from over the border and employs them illegally says he likes them because "they work hard, they don't eat much, and they don't need any documents".

Human rights groups are concerned that some Uzbekistan nationals are being sold into slave labour. They say cases of forced labour increase as the season for picking vegetables and melons approaches.

The human rights group Najot, based in the northern Khorezm region, reports that 68 people from one district there have been sold and pressed into forced labour on farms in Russia in recent months.

"They were trafficked by enterprising Uzbekistan nationals, who sold them to contractors," Hayitboy Yoqubov, head of Najot, said.

This spring, two labour migrants approached the Najot group on behalf of 29 people they said were enslaved on melon farms in Russia. According to Yoqubov, they reported that one of the group, Gauhar Nurullaeva from Khorezm's Khazarasp district, was buried up to her waist until she signed a piece of paper saying she was happy with her conditions.

In its 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report released in June, the US State Department said Uzbekistan was a source country for men, women and children subjected to forced labour, as well as women and children subject to sex trafficking. The report said the government had not shown signs of making more of an effort to address the problem over the previous year.

In theory, Uzbekistan has laws to combat trafficking and forced labour. In April, the government approved a plan for implementing international conventions banning forced labour and child labour.

Rights workers say the authorities need to take tougher action on the ground.

"The police arrest small numbers of human traffickers, while far more remain at liberty," Yoqubov said. "We pass their names to the police, but our requests are ignored. Even when we secure someone's freedom from enslavement, once they return home the police reprimand them for being in contact with human rights defenders."

Some observers believe the problem of forced labour can only be addressed if the economic factors that drive people abroad change.

"The roots of slavery lie in people's desperation," Elena Ryabinina, head of the asylum programme at the Human Rights Institute in Moscow, said. "We have to eliminate the factors that generate labour migration, and change social and economic policies in Uzbekistan."

This article was produced as part of IWPR's News Briefing CentralAsia output, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

If you would like to comment or ask a question about this story, please contact our Central Asia editorial team at feedback.ca@iwpr.net.

Topic: [Human rights](#)

Focus: [Марказий Осиё янгиликлар маълумотномаси](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbeks-face-high-risks-migrant-workers>