

Uzbeks Prey to Modern Slave Trade

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

As poverty and unemployment drive an increasing number of workers abroad, many become victims of traffickers who sell them into virtual slavery.

When Abror, an unemployed engineer at the locomotive depot in Urgench, in northwest Uzbekistan, lost all hope of getting a job at home, he left for the Volgograd region of Russia in search of a better life.

But he found no job that matched his skills. Unwilling to go back to Uzbekistan, where his family and aged mother depended on him returning with money, he took a job with a local farmer. In return for weeding vegetable patches, feeding the poultry and cleaning the hen house, the farmer promised him a small wage.

Abror's new life as a servant rapidly turned into a form of slavery. Far from giving him any wages, the farmer seized Abror's identity papers and told him he was not going to pay him any money as he would have "nowhere to spend it".

After eight months, Abror managed to get away. A fellow Uzbek who visited the farm warned the owner that he would tell the police he was harbouring an illegal immigrant.

But this rescuer was no Samaritan. He was a trafficker working in the flourishing twilight world of illegal migrants. After prising Abror out of the hands of the farmer, he demanded 300 US dollars for services rendered.

In spite of his grim experience in Volgograd, Abror plans to hire himself out again this spring to repay this debt.

"Once it gets warm, I'll sell myself into slavery again," he said. "What else can I do? Otherwise, my family of four will be left to live off my sick mother's pension."

EXODUS DRIVEN BY EMPLOYMENT AND LOW WAGES

Nadir Kurbanov, a senior investigator with the Interior Ministry in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, told a recent meeting that far too many people were falling victim to traffickers and organised exploitation when they go abroad.

He attributed the phenomenon to inadequate knowledge of the law among migrant workers, coupled with the high unemployment rate in Uzbekistan which drives many to go abroad.

"The people who get sold into slavery are those who don't have permanent jobs," Kurbanov told a round-

table in Tashkent on February 1, designed to raise public awareness of labour laws and migrants' rights abroad.

The unemployment rate in the Central Asian state is disputed. Officials claim only 0.6 per cent of the population are jobless, whereas the World Bank put the figure at six per cent in 2006 and local human rights activists believe it is closer to 20 per cent.

Wages are so low that even people who have jobs in Uzbekistan commonly seek higher-paid work abroad, generally in Russia and increasingly Kazakhstan. The work is mostly seasonal manual labour, although some Central Asians stay on, acquire Russian residence rights and lose touch with home. (IWPR reported last year how people from Tajikistan travelling to Russia and Kazakhstan were similarly vulnerable to fraud and exploitation – see **Tajik Migrants Fleeced by Shady Travel Firms**, RCA No. 498, 22-June-07)

According to the Uzbek government's statistical agency, the average monthly wage was 50 dollars a month last year. This is not enough to live on – an official report published in late February 2008 put monthly average outgoings on food, utilities and transport at over 150 dollars, or 200,000 soms, per person.

The chasm between low wages and the relatively high cost of living, accentuated by the tradition of raising large families, forces many breadwinners to go abroad to work.

Surat Ikramov, leader of the Tashkent-based Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Activists, estimates that up to five million of Uzbekistan's 27 million people are working abroad.

“Naturally, some of this number are labour or sex slaves,” said.

Mirzarahmat, 37, from the southern Uzbek region of Surkhandarya, spent a long time working illegally on a Russian building site constructing a house for a wealthy man.

In Mirzarahmat's case, although the job amounted to little more than serfdom, he said it was “voluntary and conscious slavery”.

“We were working illegally in grim conditions, and we were prepared to undergo all kinds of hardship and terrible risks in the hope of earning money,” he said.

Farida Abdurahmanova, who is deputy mayor of Tashkent as well as sitting in the Uzbek parliament's upper house, argues that it is never worth agreeing to exploitation.

“Neither unemployment nor poverty and need are good reasons for anyone to fall victim to the slave

trade,” said Abdurahmanova in a recent speech.

WORKERS LINE UP FOR JOBS ABROAD

The gangmasters who recruit poor and unemployed Uzbeks for illegal work abroad know just where to find them.

One unofficial recruitment centre is the small town of Keles, 15 kilometres from Tashkent, near the border with Kazakstan.

Unemployed Uzbeks from all over the country stream into the town and sit by the roadside for days on end, waiting for potential employers and recruiters.

Although these people hope to head abroad, they are an extension of the common practice in Uzbekistan where a casual worker or “mardikor” will hire himself out for a day’s work, which might consist of working in the fields or helping repair someone’s home.

“You can always find a manual labourer here ready to do any job, often just for some food, such as a bowl of soup and some tea and bread,” said one man engaged in hiring labourers.

The labourers for hire here say the risks are preferable to trying to find casual work as “mardikors” in Tashkent.

“It’s better to wait in Keles for a job [abroad] than go to Tashkent in search of a living,” said one man, wearing a torn jacket as he squatted on the ground beside the road. “The police there would pick us up for not having residence rights in the capital and they’d pack us off to special [community service] centres where they’d use us as a free workforce anyway.”

Most of the recruiters hiring labour in places like Keles are Uzbek nationals now living in Russia who have built up businesses there.

One such middleman, who did not give his name, said people like him had no problems with the law in Uzbekistan even though much of what they did was illegal. He said local police colluded in “our very well-organised industry” of human trafficking.

The recruiters are well aware that some Russian employers will not pay the illegal “gastarbeiters” a penny.

“After we’ve assembled a group of people who want to go to Russia to earn some money, we take away their documents – we tell them it’s a temporary thing to get them through all the checkpoints we’ll meet on the way,” said the middleman in Keles.

“We cover all their [travel] costs, but on reaching our destination, we sell them to ‘slave-owners’ for between 17,000 and 20,000 Russian roubles each [700 or 800 dollars]. To get their documents back, the slaves need to work for a year or more.”

NATIONAL LAWS TOO WEAK TO BE EFFECTIVE

The latest US State Department report on human trafficking in Uzbekistan notes that men are trafficked to Russia, Kazakhstan and also Kyrgyzstan for “domestic servitude and forced labour”, while women are taken illegally to work in the sex industry in a wider range of countries including the United Arab Emirates, Thailand and Turkey.

In the report, which covered 2007, the State Department said the Uzbek government did not fully comply with minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking, adding that it “is not making significant efforts to do so”. Specifically, anti-trafficking legislation pending since 2003 had yet to be passed, and penalties under existing laws had not been increased.

A police officer in the Khorezm region in the north of the country said poor legislation in Uzbekistan, weakly enforced and difficult to bring to court, was a major reason why the trade continued.

As things stand, aspects of the trade in people – for example, sex trafficking – are punishable under various statutes, but there is no comprehensive body of criminal law on the subject.

For those involved in trafficking manual workers, the most applicable piece of legislation is article 135 of the Uzbek criminal code, which sets out fines and prison sentences of up to three years for those convicted of fraudulently recruiting people for work abroad. In practice, though, few people are found guilty of this offence.

As an observer in northern Uzbekistan put it, “This article of the criminal code is one of the most difficult to prove.”

One reason for this is that the illegal trade is, almost by definition, conducted without any paperwork that might be used in evidence. Also, victims are reluctant to name and testify against their traffickers. Finally, cases may never get as far as prosecution due to collusion between those directly involved and local police officers.

GOVERNMENT DRAGS FEET ON INTERNATIONAL ACCORDS

The failure to draft robust and comprehensive national legislation mirrors Tashkent's reluctance to sign up to the corresponding international accords. Nor has the government seemed keen to work out agreements within a regional framework, even though its own legal powers end the moment the traffickers cross out of its territory.

Uzbekistan has yet to sign a number of United Nations conventions relating to labour migrants and is not a member of the International Labour Organisation. Its international commitment to combating the trafficking and exploitation of labour comes down to one document, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, which it ratified in 2003. However, the Uzbeks have yet to ratify a 2000 protocol to the convention covering trafficking in persons.

A commentator in Khorezm said it was a shame the government had failed to sign either international or bilateral agreements on human trafficking and basic rights for migrants.

In November, for example, the former Soviet states which form the Eurasian Economic Community approved a draft agreement that would guarantee reciprocal rights for nationals of one member country working temporarily in another. Uzbekistan, however, abstained - even though it is one of the countries that could stand to gain the most from guarantees extended by recipient states like Russia.

"Uzbekistan did not approve it and confined itself merely to expressing an opinion," said the observer in Khorezm.

However, such attitudes may be changing. Last year, Uzbekistan did ratify a bilateral agreement with Russia outlining protections for their respective nationals when working in the other state.

At national level, a migration official from the Uzbek interior ministry was quoted on February 28 as saying "preventive measures" were being considered as a way of curbing with illegal migration including forced labour.

NEW POLICIES INCLUDE AWARENESS-RAISING

The migration official, Colonel Mirjalol Karimov, quoted by the official Press-uz.info website, added that leaflets would be published to spread the word among labour migrants about how to avoid exploitation.

Efforts to provide public-service information of this kind via television and radio were also noted in the otherwise critical State Department report on Uzbekistan.

The need for such information is apparent from the gulf between people's desperation to leave and the extent to which they are properly prepared. A survey conducted by the non-government group Tong

Jahonim in 2006 found that more than 90 per cent of young people in Uzbekistan wanted to go abroad in search of work, yet less than one per cent of them knew anything at all about the procedures for exiting their own country and living and working elsewhere.

As well as the state, a number of non-government groups are running awareness campaigns and offering practical advice to people planning to work abroad.

Istikbolli Avlod, for example, has branches in several regions of Uzbekistan and offers a telephone hotline on employee rights abroad, as well as giving legal advice to the victims of trafficking and exploitation.

“We get calls from abroad, and we’ve managed to get people released from slavery a number of times. Recently we’ve been getting a lot of phone calls from people in Kazakstan,” said one member of the group, who did not want to be named.

A longer-term objective, perhaps, would be to improve economic conditions in Uzbekistan enough to stem the tide of migrants. Tashkent’s deputy mayor Abdurahmanova, for example, has argued that the authorities must get more people into work using the official employment exchange offices.

At the moment, the 30,000 or so vacancies advertised in Tashkent’s employment offices are mostly for low-paid, unskilled jobs. Jobs in metalwork or as cleaners pay only about 50,000 to 70,000 soms a month, for example, or between 30 and 50 dollars.

These state-run job agencies do not currently offer information or advice about working in Russia and Kazakstan, although they do put together teams of workers to go to South Korea.

The new private firms that have sprung up are really geared towards professionals who are heading for pre-arranged jobs in places like Poland, and who can afford to pay a fee for the service.

“You have to pay 1,500 to 2,000 dollars for these intermediary services,” said a local commentator.

“Potential slaves, the kind of people who are willing to do any kind of dirty work, certainly don’t have that kind of money.”

These “potential slaves” constitute the least well-informed group of migrants, and consequently the least able to defend their legal rights. But for the moment, there is little sign they are heeding warnings that they are placing themselves at risk by entrusting their future to the wrong people. And even if they are aware of the dangers, the hope of earning decent money still seems to outweigh any concerns.

Location: [Central Asia](#)
[Uzbekistan](#)
[Turkmenistan](#)

Turkey

Topic: Special Report

Focus: Central Asia Human Rights Reporting Project

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbeks-prey-modern-slave-trade>