

Uzbeks Take Chances as Migrant Labour

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It is the cotton-picking season in Uzbekistan, but hundreds of rural workers are choosing to slip out of the country to work on cotton plantations in neighbouring Kazakhstan, where they can earn much more.

Entire families cross the border, in the hope of earning three times as much as they would at home in Uzbekistan - where wages in any case often remain unpaid for months.

Although many make good money from the work, others find themselves "sold" by unscrupulous middlemen and end up being exploited and cheated of their wages.

Family groups just come for the autumn picking season, while some men come for longer stints. Murod Rahimov and five friends from the Andijan region have been in Kazakhstan for the past year. "We have a nice, honest boss," Rahimov told IWPR. "We get our wages at the end of the week, and we have good food."

Rahimov's plantation manager Alimkhan said he had never seen such a hard-working team, "We Kazaks don't know how to work the land - the Uzbeks are our true helpers."

Alimkhan has paid Rahimov 3,500 US dollars over the last year - a small sum by most standards, but a great deal of cash for rural Uzbekistan. As Rahimov said, this money has saved his family from dire poverty.

People in his position, with few prospects at home, are continuing to make the trip despite stringent border controls which the Uzbek authorities introduced late last year. "There are now many more people from Uzbekistan who are willing to go to Kazakhstan when cotton-harvest time begins" said Bahodir Berdibaev, a senior customs officer in Jizzakh region.

The district authorities appear to recognise the importance of the extra income for local farming communities, and make little effort to stop people going. According to Musa Anarbaev, head of the region's Mirzachul district, it is impossible to stop them, "If we restrain people by force, it could have unforeseen consequences since people can at least earn some money in Kazakhstan."

At a frontier checkpoint in Jizzakh, the IWPR contributor saw a crowd of about 50 Uzbek men and women of all ages, as well as children, dressed in worn-out clothes and carrying bags or sacks as they waited to cross into Kazakhstan. Among them was Sarsenbay, a 60-year old father of 10 from the north-west region of Karakalpakstan, with members of his family.

"It is hard to make money in Karakalpakstan, and they tell me that I'll get paid up to 15 tenge [10 US cents] for a kilogramme of cotton over there, and no hassles," he said.

According to an Uzbek customs officer, most people cross the border illegally, often via secondary roads, so it is hard to tell how many make the trip. In some cases, people are recruited by hiring agents, who deal with the border formalities.

These middlemen - of both Uzbek and Kazak nationality - often hire workers when they arrive on the border. Alimkhan paid about 35 dollars to an agent for each of the Uzbeks he hired, including Rahimov.

Serikbay Beyjanov, who runs a collective farming in the Jetysai district, just inside of Kazakstan, told IWPR that he had come down to the border to pick up a new batch of migrant workers. He already had 30 people, including women and children, picking cotton on his farm. He said he offers them pay, hot meals and accommodation.

Not all Uzbek workers find themselves so well treated. There have been cases where employers and agents have swindled and mistreated their recruits.

In one recent case in Mirzachul district, a local woman recruited 36 men and women from Samarkand and shipped them off to Kazakstan with the promise of 100 dollar-a-month earnings. Kazak bosses paid her a cut of 25 dollars per person, put the Uzbeks in barracks accommodation in Shardara in southern Kazakstan, and confiscated their passports.

"We worked on cotton plantations," recalled 18-year-old Zulaikho Yusupova, "but we fell into the hands of crooks. They treated us like slaves and the food rations were poor. We were given a loaf of black bread and two spoonfuls of sugar per day.

"When we started demanding the money we'd earned, they replied that slaves don't get paid."

"At the barracks where we lived there were 150 other Uzbeks from all over the country," continued 20-year-old Samarkand man Muhammad Khursandov, "Some of them attempted to flee when they could no longer stand the harsh conditions, but they were quickly caught, and severely beaten up."

Relatives were shocked to see how ragged, hungry and broken-down the group were when they returned to Samarkand in late August. Some went to the police, where they described how their sons and daughters had been lured to Kazakstan. However, the police in Jizzakh region recently said there was insufficient evidence to press charges against the woman who acted as intermediary.

The police say they know of 10 people in Jizzakh who are engaged in sending or "selling" people abroad. Although criminal cases have been opened against three of them, these were subsequently dropped.

Few Uzbeks planning to take jobs on Kazak cotton farms will be deterred by such horror stories, since so many other people are returning with pockets full of money.

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Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

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