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Labor Migrants From Central Asia Open to Harassment in Russia

Thousands of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia continue to face difficulties over their status in the country, leaving them open to harassment by local law enforcement officials, IRIN reported Thursday.

"If you don't pay the police, they will never let you go. If they catch you in the street, they'll extort money for sure," complained Holmulin Halikov, a migrant worker from Uzbekistan working for a construction company in Moscow. "They threaten to put you in a car and to take you away even when your documents are in order and often demand bribes," the migrant worker in his 30s said.

Almaz, another labor migrant from southern Kyrgyzstan, agreed, noting the number of times he too has had to pay bribes. "If police catch us we pay them 100 to 200 rubles (some \$4 to \$7.50) and they let us go," he said.

Due to a longstanding migration regime between Russia and four of the five Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, nationals of those countries going to Russia do not need a visa. However, there is a registration system in place, which is the major problem for labor migrants.

"Upon arrival in Russia you have to register within three days, which is impossible. Many migrant workers like me stay with their friends or in rented apartments. Physically, it is not possible to get your paperwork done on time," Makhmadsho, a Tajik migrant laborer in Moscow, asserted.

According to various estimates, there are over 1 million Central Asian migrant workers in Russia, the overwhelming majority of whom are working illegally due registration problems. The largest group is from Tajikistan — roughly 600,000 — or 10 percent of that country's population.

In an effort to normalize many illegal migrants in Russia, the country's parliament, the Duma, ratified a law aimed at improving the conditions of labor migrants from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in December 2005.

The governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan view the adoption of the law as a turning-point in the rights of their citizens in Russia, while Russian authorities praise the new law, saying it would better control migration.

But five months on, the situation for Central Asian labor migrants in many Russian cities, including Moscow, has shown little sign of improvement.

"Over the past five months conditions for migrants have worsened instead of improving," claimed Gauhar Juraeva, head of the Moscow-based Migration and Rights NGO, helping migrants protect their rights.

According to the activist, there has been an increase in the incidence of rights violations recently. "I have received a call from the Moscow region. There were Tajik, Uzbek and

Kyrgyz migrants working in one construction site. Instead of paying their salaries, their employer handed them over to 'gangsters'. Now several migrants are hiding in the forest," she said.

Tajimamat Shabolotov, a representative of the Kyrgyz State Committee on Migration and Employment in Russia, said that the new agreement was easing some legal procedures only for businessmen and traders in the destination country.

"The condition of some categories of migrants has been improved since last year, according to the agreement on migrants between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Now it is easy for Kyrgyz businessmen to run their businesses in Russia. But this agreement does not have any effect on migrants who came to work for only one season," Shabolotov maintained, adding it failed to resolve the fundamental issue of registration.

Meanwhile, the Russian parliament is reportedly discussing new laws to tackle the issue. "If they [the laws] are accepted by this summer, it will be easy for this group of migrants to get registered," Shabolotov believed.

Welcoming the initiative, Natalia Scherbakova from the International Labor Organization (ILO) subregional office for eastern Europe and Central Asia in Moscow said she was expecting some changes later this year. "This law might not be accepted by the summer of this year. Maybe they [the lawmakers] will come up with some solutions in the autumn," she said.

"We are glad that Russia is looking for ways to solve this issue legally and attract labour migrants to Russia instead of stopping the migration completely," the ILO official added.