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### **Urban Facelift, Turkmen Style**

Suburbs fall victim to Turkmen president's grand design as he rebuilds the capital to his own taste.

By IWPR staff in London (RCA No. 301, 21-Jul-04)

Keshi used to be a quiet Turkmen village on the fringes of the capital Ashgabat. Now its residents face eviction, with no chance of appeal and no offer of compensation or alternative housing.

The people of Keshi are the latest victims of an urban development boom in which whole residential areas are bulldozed, often to make way for construction projects on a grand scale.

The character of the city – once a mix of provincial Russian architecture, one-storey Turkmen houses and Soviet concrete – has changed over the last decade so that the skyline is now dominated by plate-glass hotels and grand official buildings.

Keshi, which used to be a separate village which now falls within the city limits, was first affected by urban planning a few years ago when dozens of houses were ordered to be demolished to widen the main street, because it lies on the route along which Turkmenistan's president Saparmurad Niazov travels to work daily from his country residence.

Residents bore this demolition without protest. But now the village faces a second assault. In June, the authorities ordered the destruction of New Keshi, a housing development of brick-built houses that lies along the presidential route.

The orders came from the autocratic president Niazov – who styles himself Turkmenbashi or Leader of the Turkmen – who reportedly did not like the look of the new houses, and wanted them cleared.

An attempt by women from Keshi to appeal to United Nations office in Ashgabat backfired badly. "They heard us out and took us back home in minibuses," said one of the women. "For the next three days all inhabitants of the settlement were kept under house arrest and the district was ringed with police and National Security Ministry agents. When residents of a neighbouring street tried following our example, they were taken away in police vans."

By the end of June, 500 families had been served with unsigned and undated notices from Ashgabat's urban planning department ordering them to leave their houses within ten days.

They have not been offered other housing or compensation for the loss of their homes, because the authorities have ruled that official papers dating from 1990, distributing land plots from a collective farm, are illegal. Those papers were issued while the Soviet Union still existed; Turkmenistan became an independent state only the following year.

"I can't imagine what will happen to us," said one resident, who like others did not want to be identified for fear of retribution. "I have three children. Am I supposed to go back to live with my parents? That counts as disgrace for a Turkmen."

Many families have nevertheless moved in with relatives since further resistance seems pointless.

"We went to the district administration and argued with them, but all we got back was a heap of abuse," said a local woman. "It's not just me – everyone is furious at this lawlessness."

Keshi is only the latest part of the capital to be affected by Turkmenbashi's version of town planning. Local analysts say thousands of homes have been bulldozed in recent years.

An official in the Ashgabat mayor's office, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR, "We are scared of Turkmenbashi's raids on the city. He points quite arbitrarily at a building he doesn't like and says 'Away with it!'. It's impossible to disobey him."

Another village on the outskirts of the capital, the village of Berzengi was recently obliterated to make room for an aqua-park, even though there are large swathes of empty land nearby. Streets of houses close to the city centre have been cleared for a new park modelled on Disneyland.

A showcase for Turkmenbashi's administration, the Ruhyet Palace – a white marble edifice housing the justice and defence ministries and the central bank – also came at the cost of a large residential part of central Ashgabat. Local people here were luckier than many others, since they did at least get compensation and plots of land, even though the latter were far from the city centre.

There is plenty more construction in the pipeline. In June, President Turkmenbashi approved the construction of major new business complexes which will host the local franchises of firms such as the DaimlerChrysler automotive group and United States tractor manufacturer Caterpillar.

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