

18 October 2005

Uzbekistan: authorities deny return of several thousand villagers displaced from Tajik border

In response to cross-border incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a rebel group operating from neighbouring Tajikistan, the Uzbek government in 2000 and 2001 forcibly displaced several thousand villagers from the mountainous border region in southern Uzbekistan. The villagers were relocated to resettlement villages approximately 250 kilometres away in an open desert area. Although little information is available on the current conditions of Uzbekistan's internally displaced people (IDPs), reports and anecdotal information suggest that despite a government resettlement plan, IDPs continue to face difficulty sustaining their livelihoods. As the freedom of movement of IDPs is restricted, they have limited opportunities to seek employment. While some IDPs were provided land by the government, successfully growing crops and food is challenging as the land provided in many instances is infertile. IDPs also experience sporadic gas and power outages, and as many homes provided by the government lack proper insulation living through the winter months is especially difficult. Since their displacement, IDPs have been harassed and abused by local authorities. The displacement operation itself was accompanied by violence; in many cases armed soldiers forced villagers to leave their homes at gunpoint and then pillaged and torched their homes. Threats of violence continue to be used as a means of suppressing opposition and protests by IDPs. A number of IDPs may remain languishing in prison as a result of charges brought against them by local authorities during the displacement operation – the trials which took place flouted rules of due process and torture was used to obtain confessions of IDPs collaborating with the IMU. While IDPs were initially told their displacement was only temporary, the government has no plans to facilitate their return. Numerous actors confirm that IDPs still wish to return to their homes; however, as landmines currently exist along the border with Tajikistan a return may be impossible due to safety and security concerns.

While the international community has renewed its attention on Uzbekistan in light of the events that took place in Andijan in May 2005, this attention has so far has not been extended to the situation of the IDPs in southern Uzbekistan. The IDPs reportedly do not receive any international assistance nor is their situation monitored, yet first-hand monitoring is clearly needed by international agencies to assess the current conditions of the displaced. There are concerns that the dramatically deteriorating political and economic situation in Uzbekistan may further increase tensions within the country, presenting a risk of open conflict and possible further displacement.

Background and causes of displacement

In 2000 and 2001, the government of Uzbekistan forcibly relocated thousands of inhabitants from mountain villages located along the Uzbek-Tajik border in the Surkhandaria province in southern Uzbekistan (HRW, September 2003, p.31, US DOS, 25 February 2004, p. 20). While authorities say that 1,333 people were affected by the forced displacement operation (Government of Uzbekistan, 9 August 2005), independent sources estimate the affected population to be between 3,000 and 4,000 people (HRW, September 2003, p. 31; IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). More recent estimates indicate that the number of internally displaced persons in southern Uzbekistan could number above 5,000 (IRIN, 16 June 2004), or even near 10,000 (Email correspondence, NGO representative, 26 August 2005). As there is lack of current information on the IDPs in Surkhandaria, it has not been possible to verify estimates of those affected by the displacement operation.

The forced relocations appear to have been part of a broader crackdown by government on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other independent Islamic organisations. Reports suggest that the deportations were used as collective punishment for the alleged sympathies and support of some of the inhabitants for the IMU (IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12; HRW, September 2003, p.30). As noted below, a number of villagers were arrested during the displacement operation and charged with supporting the IMU.

According to the government, the displacements were necessary to safeguard the physical safety of villagers residing along Uzbekistan's border with Tajikistan, an area affected by incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Government of Uzbekistan, 9 August 2005). Other reasons given by the authorities include concerns that the IMU was using border villages as points of transfer for its members, and that health and educational conditions in the border villages were inadequate (Government of Uzbekistan, 9 August 2005; IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). The risk of landslides and floods were also mentioned as official reasons for the forced displacement (HRW, September 2003, p.31).

Forced displacement in Surkhandaria took place in three stages; the first in August 2000 when the IMU incursions occurred, the second in February 2001, and the third incident took place in September 2001 a year after the official end of military activities. Villagers had little if any warning of the displacement, they were forced to leave their homes at gunpoint by army representatives and local authorities (HRW, September 2003, p.31). Some villagers were forced onto helicopters which flew them to temporary camps located in nearby steppes (IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). When one organisation inquired why villagers were not informed prior to their forced displacement, authorities responded by saying that villagers could not be notified of the impending operation in advance as they may have gone into hiding or prepared "illegal actions" (IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). Many villagers were forced to leave personal possessions, food supplies, and livestock behind. If villagers resisted

leaving, authorities threatened and beat villagers, soldiers fired shots into the air, and pillaged and torched homes. While villagers were first told that they would eventually be allowed to return home, they were later informed that their relocation was permanent (HRW, September 2003, p.31; US DOS, 25 February 2004, p. 20).

As part of the first phase of the forced displacement operation, in August 2000 villagers were initially transported to camps in nearby steppes; the camps lacked infrastructure and no assistance was provided for as long as two weeks. The camps were also surrounded by armed soldiers. A number of men who had been forcibly removed were taken to a nearby police station for questioning and then returned ten days later (IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). While in custody the men were beaten by local authorities in an attempt to obtain confessions which could be used to prove the villagers' collaboration with the IMU (US Mission to the OSCE, 22 February 2001).

In response to protests from human rights groups and humanitarian organisations, in November 2000 IDPs were moved from camps in the steppes to settlements where land was provided for cultivation purposes (IHF, 18 July 2001, p.12). The sites of resettlement, located in the inner regions of Surkhandaria and Kashkardaria provinces, are almost 250 kilometres away from the villagers' homes in an open desert area (HRW, September 2003, p.30).

During the forced evacuation approximately 120 villagers were arrested, and 73 of them were charged with supporting IMU militants (HRW, September 2003, p. 31 & 33). The arrests most likely oc-

curred in an effort to eliminate support for the IMU and minimise resistance to the forced displacement operation. The arrests may also have been government reprisals against villagers who protested being moved from the initial tent camps to resettlement locations (HRW, September 2003, p. 33). After enduring torture and general mis-treatment, the group of villagers were tried and convicted in June 2001; it was further observed that the legal proceedings flouted due process and the trials were grossly unfair. As one example, out of all the cases of arrest that Human Rights Watch documented, police never produced warrants for arrest. Sentences varied from three to eighteen-year prison terms (HRW, September 2003, p.31). Following an amnesty declared in December 2002 in honour of the anniversary of Uzbekistan's constitution, 37 villagers were released from prison (IHF, 19 May 2003). Thus at the time of writing many of the villagers may still remain imprisoned.

Humanitarian conditions

Due to the lack of current information on the conditions in the resettlement sites, the overall situation of the IDPs remains unclear. The evidence that is known is either anecdotal or outdated. As not a single international agency is assisting the IDPs in Surkhandaria, information gathered could not be confirmed. In 2004, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) discontinued monitoring of resettlement villages in Surkhandaria as it was deemed the IDPs were "nearly self-sufficient and that the Uzbek government was attending to their main problems" (ICRC, 2004, p.187). The International Federation of the Red Cross

(IFRC) in Uzbekistan no longer assists the displaced either, saying that it is the government's responsibility to take care of them (Interview with IFRC representative, 4 August 2005). The government indeed has claimed it is carrying out a resettlement programme to be completed by 2005. According to government information, the programme has begun to improve the living conditions of IDPs by providing a medical clinic in one of the settlements, assisting job-seekers in obtaining employment, improving the structures of IDP residence homes, and by providing a number of IDPs with pensions (UN Human Rights Committee, August 2004, p.29). Independent information on the status of the programme is not available. However, a number of reports and information gathered through interviews indicate that many IDPs are still living below the socio-economic levels of the general population in southern Uzbekistan.

Previous to their displacement, the IDPs were mountain dwellers who sustained themselves through raising livestock and used the land in and around their villages to grow agricultural goods native to the landscape. They were forcibly relocated 250 kilometres away to a totally different ecological and geographic setting. Resettlement villages are located in an open, barren desert where conditions are known to be harsh and thus many IDPs continue to face difficulties supporting themselves and their families (IWPR, 22 August 2003, p.2). Growing food and crops is challenging because the land provided to the IDPs is infertile due to a high volume of salinity (Interview with representative of international organisation, 12 August 2005; IRIN, 16 June 2004, "Plight of IDPs in the south neglected"). Finding

permanent employment is also hard as IDPs are restricted from moving beyond their immediate areas of resettlement (Interviews with representatives of international organisations, 12 August 2005 & 3 August 2005). Permission from local authorities is necessary to move to a new city (US DOS, 28 February 2005, p.14). In some of the resettlement sites, no public transport is available and many IDPs walk long distances searching for employment (IWPR, 22 August 2003, p.2). Due to the general conditions of impoverishment and the lack of assistance, numerous deaths in Zarbdor resettlement were reported (IWPR, 22 August 2003, p.2). Although authorities promised to provide every IDP family compensation in the form of a payment of approximately \$700, as of August 2003 this payment had yet to be paid out (IWPR, 22 August 2003, p.2).

Informal observations and unconfirmed reports indicate that material conditions in resettlement villages remain dire (Interview with representative of international organisation, 12 August 2005; Email correspondence with NGO representative, 26 August 2005). Another report notes that IDPs continue to experience a lack of clean drinking water (IRIN, 16 June 2004, "Plight of IDPs in the south neglected"). In 2003 it was acknowledged that houses in the Istiklol resettlement were at risk of collapse as a result of inadequate foundations. Housing was also constructed without proper isolation, and as sporadic power and gas outages were reported to be common, winters were especially hard to survive (IRIN, 8 December 2003, "Focus on IDPs in Surkhandarya"). Medecines Sans Frontieres (MSF) reports that while health conditions may be adequate, IDPs

continue to deal with many psycho-social problems (Interview, MSF representative, 3 August 2005). Regardless of the conditions in resettlement locations, IDPs were able to vote in the December 2004 parliamentary elections (OSCE/ODIHR, 7 March 2005, p.12)

Return

Reports and information gathered from organisations operating in Uzbekistan indicate that a large number of people in southern Uzbekistan remain displaced. While the majority of IDPs appear to be wanting to return to their homes, (IRIN, 16 June 2004, “Plight of IDPs in the south neglected”), a number of reports and information shared with the Global IDP Project indicates the permanent nature of the displacement operation (HRW, September 2003, p.31; US DOS, 25 February 2004, p.20; Interview with NGO representative, 3 August 2005). According to one NGO representative, local authorities in Surkhandaria have said that IDPs may not return to their mountain villages because of potential landslides, yet the underlying reason for not allowing a return remains maintaining border security (Interview with NGO representative, 3 August 2005). As a number of landmine-related deaths were recently reported along the border with Tajikistan (US DOS, 28 February 2005, p.3), the border areas most likely remain unsafe for villagers to return.

International response

The situation of the displaced in southern Uzbekistan is largely ignored by the international community. Initially, the in-

ternational community advocated on behalf of the IDPs through public reporting and assistance was provided to them by the ICRC and the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. Attention to the plight of the displaced has slowly waned over the years – interviews conducted with international agencies in Tashkent indicate that the IDP situation is no longer being monitored, and there are no agencies providing assistance.

The lack of international attention on IDPs may be related to the success of the Uzbek government in silencing complaints and controlling information related to the displacement situation. The displaced have been warned by local authorities not to speak to visitors about their conditions, and if they do speak out, only positive statements should be made (HRW, September 2003, p.32). Residents of one resettlement village also report that after a number of articles appeared on the internet regarding conditions in the region, security officers threatened IDPs (IWPR, 22 August 2003, p.2).

Despite the lack of attention on IDPs in southern Uzbekistan, as a result of the massacre in Andijan and the following evacuation of Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan, renewed international focus has been brought to the overall human rights situation in Uzbekistan (ICG, 25 May 2005; IRIN, 24 August 2005, “UN refugee agency reacts”). A group of human rights organisations recently appealed to the OSCE to invoke the rarely used Moscow Mechanism to enable a team of international experts to investigate the Andijan events (AI, 30 September 2005). In response to the government’s refusal to allow an independent investigation, the EU has imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan

(IRIN, 12 October 2005, "Rights activists welcome"). Relations with the United States have soured as well after the Uzbek government issued an eviction order to the US air force operating from a base within Uzbekistan (RFE/RL, 6 October 2005).

However, as reports of grim conditions in resettlement locations continue to

emerge, there is a clear role for the international community to remind the authorities of their obligations towards the displaced population, and to resume its involvement in monitoring the situation in the relocation sites with a view to assessing assistance needs.

Sources:

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Uzbekistan country page.

About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1996, is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Geneva-based Project contributes to protecting and assisting the 25 million people around the globe, who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Global IDP Project runs an online database providing comprehensive and frequently updated information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

It also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In addition, the Project actively advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

For more information, visit the Global IDP Project website and the database at www.idpproject.org.

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