

REFUGEES

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After Andijan

*Tensions
Mount in
Central
Asia*



The troubled heart of Central Asia

When the five Central Asian republics rose from the ashes of the Soviet Union in 1991, they inherited immense problems that would have tested the resilience of any government and its people – let alone that of five countries that had never existed as independent states before.

Ten years ago, a conference was held to discuss some of those problems and see what could be done about them. The May 1996 CIS conference on

One state – Tajikistan – could not bear the strains and tumbled precipitously into a vicious and highly destructive civil war that displaced some 700,000 people.

Ten years on, some states have seen improvements – in particular the economy of Kazakhstan, which has been transformed by relatively liberal economic policies and by the booming value, and increasing accessibility, of its huge oil reserves.

Tajikistan, though still extremely poor, has also improved immeasurably from its devastated state in the early 1990s. On 30 June 2006, Tajiks who fled their country because of the 1992 civil war were scheduled to lose their refugee status after UNHCR applied the so-called “cessation clause.” This is only used when the circumstances under which refugee status was granted have ceased to exist – and is a clear marker that considerable improvement has taken place.

But even as Tajikistan continues to grapple its way slowly towards a brighter future, a new shadow has been cast across the heart of Central Asia. Uzbekistan is the only one of the five Central Asian states to share a border with all the others. Rich in gas and mineral resources, host to the legendary cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and – because of its location – in pole position to be the trading powerhouse of the region, Uzbekistan could be rivaling Kazakhstan on the economic front.

Instead, since the slaughter of hundreds of civilians in the eastern Uzbek town of Andijan on 13 May 2005, Uzbekistan has been steadily closing in on itself, in an apparent attempt to turn back the clock. In the process, it has rejected many of the states and organizations that have been working to promote civil and human rights and economic development across the region.

And once again – for the first time since a 1997 UN-brokered peace agreement officially brought the Tajik civil war to an end – refugees from one Central Asian state are flowing across the borders into the others. So far the numbers have been small, but tensions remain high and those who hope for peace in this varied, little known and stunningly beautiful region are looking on anxiously.



refugees and migrants placed a spotlight on a number of major issues caused by the sudden implosion of a huge and – as it turned out – short-lived superpower.

These ranged from environmental disasters such as the shrinking of the Aral Sea – which directly affects three of the countries – to the complex legacy of Stalin’s bizarre and ruthless policy of deporting millions of people, including eight entire ‘nationalities,’ from western areas of the USSR to Central Asia and Siberia.

The conference also exposed the extraordinary scale of involuntary movements of people in the CIS region – more than 9 million in all between 1989 and the beginning of 1996, the bulk of them from, to and within Central Asia. All this against a backdrop of economic meltdown.

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Cover Woman grieving over anonymous graves of people killed in Andijan.

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Back cover Girl staging a protest against the Andijan killings in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

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After



BY MONICA WHITLOCK

Monica Whitlock has covered Central Asia for the BBC since 1995. She was the regional correspondent based in Tashkent from 1995-98 and again from 2003 until June 2005, when she was told to leave Uzbekistan. She is the author of Beyond the Oxus; The Central Asians (John Murray, 2002). The opinions in this article are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR or the BBC.

ON THE NIGHT OF 13 MAY LAST year, an Uzbek housewife scrambled across the border into Kyrgyzstan, carrying her baby and clutching her three other young children as best she could. “The soldiers shot at us, right on the

border. We women made white flags out of our scarves but they shot us anyway. None of us had guns. My son – he’s only three – he got wedged between dead people. He was crying out ‘Mummy! Mummy!’ but I couldn’t reach him.

“Then a man pulled him out – a tall man. As he held my child, he was shot in the head. He died there bleeding. For the sake of this man, I am telling you our story.”

Zuhra (name changed) and her children were part of a group of over 500 people who had escaped alive from Andijan, after a huge, largely peaceful demonstration turned into a massacre. Behind them, hundreds lay dead in the main square and along the wide avenue running through the centre of town, shot by the armed forces of their own state, acting on

Andijan



the orders of the highest authorities.

“We just ran and ran,” Zuhra said. “I was barefoot and it was pouring with rain. All along the roads, people were opening their doors to us and saying ‘Come in! Hide with us. They’ll kill you.’ Many people did go inside. But I just ran on. I thought we would never be safe until we were out of Uzbekistan.”

The Uzbek government described the demonstration as an attempted coup by Islamic radicals, backed by foreign powers. They refused to allow any international investigation. The journalists who reported the story, including myself, were made to leave the country, as were a number of foreign NGOs and, later on, the UN refugee agency.

RISING DISCONTENT

THE STORY OF ANDIJAN GREW OUT of a small protest outside the city courthouse a hundred days before the shooting. It was mid-winter, and a handful of families came together in support of 23 local businessmen – their relatives – who were on trial, accused of plotting an Islamic revolution, a charge hotly disputed by many people in Andijan.

“My son ran a café,” a woman told us. “One day he went to work and did not come back. Then we heard he had been arrested – they said he was an extremist! He is just an ordinary person.”

There have been many similar trials in Uzbekistan, since the country came into

Tensions rise in Andijan shortly before hundreds of people were shot dead on Friday 13 May, 2005.

Local people buried the unclaimed dead in municipal flower beds, and washed blood and body parts from the streets with buckets and brooms.

being with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The authorities have frequently raised the spectre of Islamic radicalism as justification for hundreds, perhaps thousands of arrests, especially since the rise of the Taliban, just across the border in Afghanistan, in the mid-1990s.

The 23 young men in Andijan were running successful businesses – a café, a furniture factory, a shoemaker – producing goods that were, according to local people, better than the state-produced alternatives. They had standing in the community and were self-reliant, independent people. Dissatisfied with the state-run nursery schools in Andijan, for instance, they set up their own and provided other social support to the city.

It is not surprising they were arrested. It was the response that was unusual. Because the 23 had money and confidence, their families hired defence lawyers who actually fought the case. Even more unusual was the quiet determination of the demonstrators who began turning up every day – elderly parents, wives, and young children standing quietly, shivering in the cold, then growing in numbers as the case ground on and winter turned to spring.

One of the organizers, Bahram Shakirov, invited me to his house. A middle aged man, a father and grandfather, he ran a confectionery firm that was doing well – until it was shut down. Two of his sons were among the 23 on trial.

Sitting in his garden, we ate rice, meat and early

strawberries as he described his own years in prison, convicted of Islamic radicalism. He said the repeated beatings he had received had left him with permanently numb legs.

“People have become tired of the situation here,” he said. “They have had enough and they are demonstrating to show that.”

And it was not just Andijan. Elsewhere in Uzbekistan, during the winter of 2004-05, exasperation was growing – about unemployment, poverty, and a legal system that did not serve ordinary people’s interests.

Protests sprang up in central Uzbekistan, where the local government had seized the lands of successful farmers. Bazaar traders rioted when an extra tax chipped away further at the pittance they earn. The authorities acted quickly to break up such demonstrations, including one in the capital, Tashkent, in early May.

DAILY VIGIL

FAR AWAY IN THE EAST, IN ANDIJAN, THE demonstration was still growing unchecked. On 10 May, 3,000 people took their places outside the court, lining the main road in easily the biggest demonstration Uzbekistan had ever seen.

The organizers were careful not to give the authorities any grounds to break it up. No one shouted; no one waved flags; no one interfered with passing traffic. A car wash opposite the court continued to work as usual, with the demonstrators leaving a neat, empty corridor at its entry and exit. Everyone wore their best clothes. The children joined straight from school, in uniform. The women served lunch, passing round food in bowls so as not to break the line. The men even refrained from smoking.

Each evening, everyone went home, sweeping the street behind them. Each morning they were back again outside the courthouse. The demonstration had matured into a highly disciplined mass protest by determined people who were no longer afraid.

“How can you be this brave?” I asked one woman.

“My son is in prison,” she replied. “They taped a plastic bag over his head so he could not breathe. When that happens to your children, you stop being afraid.”

A MASSACRE UNFOLDS

ANDIJAN UNRAVELED AT MIDNIGHT ON 12 MAY, when a group of demonstrators seems to have stormed a barracks, broke open the armoury,

The crowd of several thousand protesters enjoying themselves in Babur Square, Andijan. Hours later, many of the people pictured here were dead or fleeing to the border with Kyrgyzstan.





SERIOUS OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA, 1989-2005

and then rammed the gate of the city jail, freeing the prisoners. The armed group rushed to the main square and took over the mayor's office, taking those inside captive.

So far, it had the appearance of a militant raid. But then an extraordinary situation emerged, as thousands of ordinary, unarmed people filled the square around – the crowds from the original demonstration, plus neighbours, friends and other people of the town. Speakers climbed up on the monument to Babur (founder of the Mogul empire and Andijan's most famous son) and held forth about poverty, unemployment, injustice and the other burdens they had borne in silence for so long.

Traders from the nearby bazaar strolled over to look, and stayed on. Women dressed up their children and took them down to the square for a day out, spreading picnics on quilts. By midday, perhaps ten thousand people filled the square.

The BBC spoke to a man, Husan, in the thick of the crowd in the early afternoon. "We are just ordinary people here," he said. "We are demonstrating peacefully. But just now, a troop carrier drove up and shot straight at us. And there are soldiers gathering now. I can see them, at the stadium and at the toy shop. There

are rumours that they are going to shoot massively at us in the evening. But we think, if we stay put, they won't dare!"

At around 6:00 p.m., he was proved tragically wrong. The BBC spoke to a man called Sharif by mobile phone: "They are shooting," he said. "They are shooting people. They are coming in armoured troop carriers. But people are staying put, they're not running. They are shooting from all sides."

An hour later, a bloc of around 3,000 demonstrators tried to leave the square. They walked along a wide avenue, holding the captured officials at the front, daring the soldiers to shoot their own people. This part of the drama was to present a major problem for some of the refugees in Kyrgyzstan over the following weeks and months (see article on page 14).

The troops met them head on.

Sharif held up his mobile phone so the BBC could record the gunfire. It continued for more than an hour before he was killed.

THE MORNING AFTER

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF SATURDAY MORNING most of the bodies were loaded on to trucks and buses and taken away. Crowds of families desperately searched

1. Intercommunal violence, Ferghana 1989
2. Intercommunal violence, Osh, 1990
3. Civil war, Tajikistan, 1992-97
4. Militant incursions, Batken region, 1999 and 2000
5. Suppression of popular demonstration, Andijan, 2005

"How can you be this brave?" I asked one woman.



A woman grips her daughter as she mourns her dead husband two days after the killings in Andijan.

the streets for missing relatives, unsure whether they had been arrested, had fled or were dead.

“My son was a baker,” one woman told us. “He went to look at the demonstration – he was curious. He never came home. We found his body on a pavement the next day, all bloody and wet with rain. I took his body home myself.” She showed me her dead son’s clothes, shot through with more than twenty bullet holes.

Local people buried some of the unclaimed dead in

municipal flower beds. They brought buckets and brooms and washed blood and body parts from the streets themselves.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UZBEKISTAN

ANDIJAN HAS BROUGHT TO A HEAD A CRISIS AT THE heart of Central Asia. It may also be the prelude to even more terrifying collisions to come if the conditions that brought it about do not improve.

The civil war in Tajikistan remains the most trenchant reminder of what can happen when Central Asia goes wrong.



© GETTY IMAGES/25. ZHUNAR GOVULBAKOV/2005

Politically, Uzbekistan is in many ways the most significant country in the region. It has the biggest population – more than 25 million – and a pivotal geographical position relative to the other Central Asian states. It controls important trade routes especially to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are fairly insecure states where poverty, unemployment and crime run high. Turkmenistan is also affected directly by tensions in its larger neighbour. Kazakhstan, too, is not immune, though its vast physical size, developing economy and land borders with Russia and China set it apart from Central Asia proper.

Uzbekistan also shares a sensitive frontier with Afghanistan. Still volatile after more than two decades of war, Afghanistan's northern provinces badly need a secure, confident neighbour to trade with. If Uzbekistan becomes even more unstable, a huge region will feel the impact.

THE FERGHANA VALLEY

SHOULD POLITICAL UPHEAVAL ERUPT, the most immediately vulnerable region may well be the Fergana valley – a great stretch of green, fertile land where Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan meet. Fergana is densely populated by Central Asian standards, with around eight million people living off the land and in a series of bazaar towns that stretch across the valley, from Andijan in the east to Kokand in the west. News and views travel quickly through the valley compared to other parts of Central Asia, where populations are cut off from each other by mountains and deserts. In ancient times, the towns of

Fergana were almost autonomous city-states, and there is still a strong tradition of independent thought.

The valley is a patchwork of different ethnic groups, generally living harmoniously together. It has also often been a conduit for armed groups. In the 1930s, anti-Soviet partisans, the 'Basmachi,' fought a long guerrilla war in the surrounding mountains, while in modern times it is one of the routes used by drug dealers bringing opium from the poppy fields of Afghanistan to the markets of Moscow.

Fergana has already seen a measure of turmoil. In June 1989 – before the Central Asian states became independent – Soviet troops had to evacuate 74,000 Meskhetians (a group forcibly deported from Georgia in 1944) from Uzbekistan's portion of Fergana,

after ten days of street battles left around 100 dead.

A year later, disputes over land and water led to several days of fighting between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh (on the Kyrgyz side of the border), during which several hundred people are believed to have been killed.

In the summers of 1999 and 2000, Uzbek militants calling for an Islamic state launched forays into Batken, in the hills skirting the Kyrgyz side of the Fergana valley. Mostly from Fergana, they had fled earlier Uzbek government campaigns against Islamic revivalists, and made their way down to Afghanistan where they fought alongside the Taliban. They emerged trained and radicalized as a jihadi force, and are now believed to be trapped in the Pakistani tribal area of Waziristan. As recently as May 2006, another group of armed men shot their way across the Tajik-Kyrgyz border at Batken.

WAR AND PEACE IN TAJIKISTAN

IT IS THE CIVIL WAR IN TAJIKISTAN, THOUGH, THAT remains the most trenchant reminder of what can happen when Central Asia goes wrong. At least twenty thousand people died in the short but vicious initial conflict from 1992-93, while many others died in the guerrilla war that continued until 1997. It was one of the bloodiest civil conflicts in a post-Soviet state, and still casts a long shadow throughout the region.

The war came about when the USSR collapsed and independence dropped "like a meteorite," as the then president of Tajikistan put it. A vibrant, colourful country sprang to life with a multitude of opposition parties, a vigorous Muslim revival movement, mass demonstrations, and demands for change. Born and moulded in another time, the leadership had no idea how to take the brand new country forward. The political ground opened up and they fell in.

Some of the 60,000 Tajik refugees who fled across the Amu river to Afghanistan in 1992-93. Another 600,000 were displaced within Tajikistan itself.

UNICEF/A. JAMA / CS / AFG-1992





Thousands of houses – including entire villages – were looted and destroyed during the Tajik civil war. Rebuilding them was an integral part of a repatriation programme that played a vital catalytic role in the peace process.

In the early summer of 1992, people all across the plains of southern Tajikistan armed themselves in terrified self-defence as the centre collapsed. Local militias formed. Trusting no one, they barricaded off their towns and villages with concrete slabs and old beds. Many crossed the border into Afghanistan to buy cheap guns. The complex mosaic of the population began to split, with village against village, local Uzbeks against local Tajiks, supporters of the old regime against the new Islamic Revival Party.

A number of neighbouring states and regional powers took an active part in supporting different factions and between them, turned a dangerous situation into a lethal one.

War unrolled across southern Tajikistan through the autumn of 1992. Militias looted and burned their way through the southern farmlands, driving thousands of families from their homes. Those who could, fled to the capital Dushanbe or to the mountains. Some escaped to relatives in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan – where many still remain to this day. But thousands more were trapped on the southern side, with nowhere to run except the Amu river – once known as the Oxus – that forms the border with Afghanistan.

By December 1992, tens of thousands of Tajik men, women and children were camped along the river, huddled against the winter cold. As the gunmen closed in, they jumped into the Amu. On planks lashed together on old tyres and tractor doors, they paddled frantically across to Afghanistan – not many people's idea of a safe haven. Some, including children, were shot from the Tajik side as they crossed.

War continued in the mountains, where forces of the new government shelled towns and villages it considered loyal to the opposition guerrilla force that was operating out of Afghanistan. There, they had found a natural affinity with the *mujahedeen* of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the famous Afghan commander who had done so much to bring down the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. The opposition managed to sustain their fight against the government for the next four years. When the two sides finally signed a UN-brokered peace deal in 1997, they won a compromise that gave them a slice of power and Tajikistan became the first Central Asian country with a legal, pluralist political system.

Considering the bloodletting and atrocities that had taken place, it says much for Tajikistan – and the bold political, peace-keeping and humanitarian

Should political upheaval erupt, the most immediately vulnerable region may well be the Ferghana valley.

initiatives carried out mainly by the UN – that reconciliation came about relatively fast.

Of a population of five and a half million, over 600,000 fled their homes during the first few months of the war, according to UNHCR – or more than one in ten of the country's citizens. Yet by the end of 1995, around 43,000 of the Tajik refugees in Afghanistan had already gone home, as had almost all the 600,000 people displaced within Tajikistan itself.

Numerous villages – some without a single house left standing – were rebuilt, and thousands of other properties that had been occupied by people other than their owners had been given back. By the end of 1997, almost everyone had returned home. Virtually all the wrecked houses have now been restored, and the complex community of Tajikistan is living in peace. The country now faces a new set of challenges, and a new mass migration, as thousands of Tajiks leave home to work as labourers in other former Soviet countries, especially Russia.

ETHNIC KALEIDOSCOPE

THE LAST THING CENTRAL Asia needs is a further violent collision, especially in its heartland of Uzbekistan. Even more than Tajikistan perhaps, the country is an ethnic kaleidoscope, with many different sorts of Uzbek, plus big Tajik populations around Bukhara, Samarkand and Navoi. There are also Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Arab communities and a Russian population, mainly in Tashkent. Many communities live entirely cut off from one another, and in such circumstances it is relatively easy for rumours to spread and fear to be ignited by ignorance. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are also highly complex, with regional loyalties and divisions which are generally opaque to the outside world.

As Central Asia enters this

critical period, the international currents around it are changing too. Shortly after independence, the Uzbek government geared part of its foreign policy towards the United States, as a counter-balance against the Russian Federation – the old colonial power. After 11 September 2001, President Karimov offered the US an airbase at Khanabad, close to the Afghan border and – ironically – the launchpad for Soviet air strikes during the 1980s war in Afghanistan.

The Americans used Khanabad as the springboard for their Afghan operations, and later built it up into a huge supply base for its troops inside Afghanistan. The US-Uzbek relationship was full of tensions, mainly over civil rights, but it remained the guiding star of Uzbek foreign policy.

After Andijan, however, came a volte face. The US State Department put out a note of concern after the shooting, calling for an international enquiry. Shortly afterwards, the Uzbek government ordered the closure of Khanabad. A group of US senators visiting two weeks after the shooting had trouble getting visas and no official agreed to meet them. They held their press conference in the US embassy basement. A few weeks earlier, they would have been fêted by dignitaries in the crystal ballroom of one of Tashkent's smart hotels.

Uzbekistan looked for support instead to the two

regional superpowers – China and Russia. Karimov flew to Beijing just ten days after Andijan to sign a \$600 million oil deal, and a week later met with President Putin in Moscow.

AN INSECURE FUTURE

A YEAR ON FROM THE shooting at Andijan, little has changed inside Uzbekistan. The people remain frustrated and desperately worried about poverty and unemployment. It is probably only a matter of time before more demonstrators dare to take to the streets, in full knowledge of what happened in Andijan. With so much blood spilt and so little prospect of peaceful reform, Uzbekistan's future looks precarious. The entire region is watching warily. ■

Flowers placed next to a blood stain in the centre of Andijan, four days after the killings.



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Tajik Returnees



UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/CS/TJK*1995

A UNHCR camera crew interviews the Najmuddinov family on the Afghan bank of the Amu river, shortly before the refugee agency took them home in May 1995.

BY VIVIAN TAN

ELEVEN YEARS AGO, SHARIF Najmuddinov, his wife Sadafmoh and their three young children returned from Afghanistan with high hopes of resuming their lives in their native Tajikistan. Their house in Leningrad, Kolkhozabad district had been completely looted, but over time they painstakingly restored their home. Today, the village is half empty again. Most of the men have left, but for a different reason – work, not war.

“You’ll only find women, young children and old men here,” said Fakhriddin, Sharif’s brother, and one of the few remaining men in Leningrad. “All able-bodied men have gone to find work in Russia. They go in spring and come back in autumn.”



UNHCR/A. TAN/DP/TJK*2006



UNHCR/A. TAN/DP/TJK*2006

going home across the Pyanj river after three difficult years in northern Afghanistan.

Sharif’s daughter, then a timid five-year-old, has grown into a confident teenager. His sons, aged 17 and 19, have gone with him to

(Top left) **Eleven years later**, in May 2006, the Najmuddinovs’ daughter studies pictures of her family’s journey home from exile.

(Left) **Sadafmoh Najmuddinov** looks at a picture of her husband Sharif greeting relatives when they first arrived back in the village in June 1995. Sharif and her two sons – now teenagers – have left to find work in the Russian Federation.

The scene is a far cry from the ecstatic return of 1995, when a UNHCR TV crew filmed the Najmuddinovs

Novosibirsk in Siberia, where they sell shoes and load goods in the market.

Life is a constant struggle for the family: the women pick cotton which they sell to the authorities for a pittance, and wait for remittances from their men in the Russian Federation. But overall, things are almost back to normal in the village. “Some people are even better off than before the war. A few families came back from Russia and built two-storey houses,” said Fakhriddin.

Rebuilding homes and trust within divided communities took time – and help. UNHCR provided materials for the reconstruction of some 20,000 houses, including those in Socialism, a village in Kabodian district. “We started from zero,” said Socialism returnee, Amriddin Hamidov. “It took two to three months to rebuild each house, and two to three years before we felt safe again.”

Relations with the neighbours have improved – “We go to each other’s parties” – but the fundamentals have not changed: “Tajik people will never marry Uzbek people,” he said, repeating what Zo’eer Uloyev, another villager in Socialism, told REFUGEES (No. 98) back in 1994. Zo’eer, too, has since moved on to the Russian Federation in search of work. Economics, not ethnicity, is the biggest problem in Socialism nowadays: “It will take another 15 years to get back to normal life. There are families that don’t have a single animal today,” said Hamidov.

That is something Imkoniyat, a micro-credit fund supported by UNHCR, is

Move On

trying to change. Some US\$90,000 has been invested to help hundreds of returnees in the south become self-reliant. The rate of reimbursement is an impressive 98 percent.

Seventy-year-old Faiziddin's row of gold teeth is a testament to the project's success. When he first returned to the village in Vaksh district in 1997, he found his house reduced to "just four walls." The loans have helped him to start afresh. This year, he produced seven tonnes of wheat, eight

tonnes of corn and 4,000 bales of hay. He has also rented land to grow cotton and potatoes, which he sells in Kurgan Tyube as well as in Dushanbe.

"With the money I made, I was able to pay for my sons' weddings, buy land and build houses for them," said Faiziddin, who has 11 children and 34 grandchildren. "I also bought three cows and a minibus that I drive to make more money."

Others have done even better. Rahmatullah returned to Rohi Nav village from northern Afghanistan in 1994. With a

modest first loan of 100 somanis (US\$33), he built a shed to grow lemons before expanding into potatoes, tomatoes and sunflowers, all sold from his shop.

"Before, I had nothing. Now I have a house, a car and two cows," he said, adding that he feels self-sufficient enough to stop taking credit for now. "I won't go to Russia like the others. I'll stay here and concentrate on my farming."

No matter how hard life is in Tajikistan, said Fakhriddin in Leningrad, "We have no regrets coming back. This is our motherland. We didn't expect anything – not even to return in the first place. So everything from there on is a pleasant surprise." ■

(Background) The Najmuddinovs and their five-year-old daughter look at familiar landmarks as they approach their home village, where they received an ecstatic welcome from family and friends.

Sadamoh Najmuddinov (centre) and her three small children enjoy their first meal on Tajik soil after their return in 1995.



UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/CS/71K1995

How the World Rallied Round



PHOTOGRAPH BY AP/WIDEWORLD

Uzbek refugees washing themselves in a ditch at the Barash site, about 100 metres inside Kyrgyzstan.

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

THE REFUGEES FROM ANDIJAN STUMBLER over a bridge across the river that marks the border with Kyrgyzstan in the early hours of 14 May, 2005. They were exhausted by the long journey

on foot in the rain; wet, cold and hungry; and stunned by the violence they had witnessed in Andijan.

Even if they did not know it straightaway, from the moment some sympathetic Kyrgyz border guards let them enter the country, they were walking right into the middle of an international political tug-of-war over their eventual fate, involving states, presidents, prime ministers, prosecutors, intelligence agencies, entities such as the EU and OSCE and refugee and human rights organizations.

For the next 76 days, until they were dramatically airlifted from Kyrgyzstan to Romania at dawn on 29 July, the tensions surrounding the group were intense and sustained.

When they had got up the previous morning in a sunny Andijan, it did not cross anyone's mind that a year later, 80 of them would be spending their tenth month in a refugee centre in Romania – a country some of them had never even heard of – and a further 360 would have moved on again to start new lives in strange surroundings in countries as far apart as Australia, Finland and the United States.

The story of how they ended up in those far-flung lands is a long roller-coaster of emotions ranging from grief over dead or missing relatives, to repeated panics about apparently imminent expulsion back to Uzbekistan, to the constant ache of separation.

There are many women – men too – among the refugees who are separated from their children, including babies and toddlers, as well as from their spouses. That, they all say, is the hardest thing to bear. There were only 12 couples and 23 children among the 439 people

evacuated to Romania in July 2005.

“Throughout this journey, we have learned how strong the feeling of missing can be, and how much you can take of it,” said Timur (name changed), a builder with three young children still in Andijan. He was speaking just after the first anniversary of the massacre. “And the longer

the Refugees from Andijan

you go, the deeper and stronger this feeling becomes. Missing home, family, relatives, friends, children.”

STUCK ON THE BORDER

UNHCR’S CHIEF OF MISSION IN KYRGYZSTAN, Carlos Zaccagnini, was called in by the National Security Office in the capital Bishkek on Saturday 14 May and informed about the arrival of the bedraggled and traumatized group a few hours after they were allowed into the country.

The following morning, he led a UNHCR team to the border encampment at Barash, where the Kyrgyz military had set up ten large tents to house the refugees. That evening, UNHCR brought in supplies of cooked food and bread for the refugees, and the following day the international NGO ACTED took over management of the site, while UNHCR concentrated on the protec-

tion issues and the politics.

“We said to the authorities “They can’t stay at the border,” and then began an uphill struggle that went on for three weeks,” said Zaccagnini. Aided by a number of foreign ambassadors based in Bishkek, he began a lengthy process of negotiations to move the group further inside Kyrgyzstan. On 19 May, Zaccagnini and the UN Resident Coordinator had a positive meeting with acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev.

EMOTIONAL BLACKMAIL

SEVERAL SITES WERE EXAMINED AND HAD to be abandoned because of opposition by local inhabitants. Finally, a site was found at Sasyk, around 20 kilometres east of the border, and the refugees were moved there on 4 June. For a brief moment, it seemed the worst was over. However, the camp’s idyllic setting – in a small

Sasyk camp, the refugees’ second home in Kyrgyzstan, where they spent eight very tense weeks before their dramatic evacuation to Romania on 29 July 2005.



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Their story is a long roller-coaster of emotions ranging from grief, to repeated panics about expulsion, to the constant ache of separation.

The group of 439 refugees disembark in Timisoara, Romania, after arriving on a specially chartered Boeing 747 from Kyrgyzstan.



valley surrounded by lush green hills typical of this part of Kyrgyzstan – proved deceptive.

The Kyrgyz-Uzbek border can be strangely porous, even at times of crisis, and the uninvited visits of the refugees' families, shepherded by Uzbek officials – which had started when they were still at the border – multiplied dramatically.

“They tried to convince me to go back,” one woman told an interviewer. “They were even dragging me out, and I realized something serious had happened to them, as they were not acting as they usually do. My mother was holding my baby and she would not give him to me. She told me to come out from the camp, and only then would she let me keep my baby.”

Almost all the refugees cite these painful scenes – which were repeated virtually on a daily basis for several weeks – as one of the most traumatic experiences during their time in Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyz Department of Migration Services began formally registering asylum claims in the camp, in accordance with Kyrgyzstan's national refugee law. But in other respects the protection situation was deteriorating fast, both at the local level and in the wider political sphere.

FORCED RETURNS

DURING THE FIRST FEW DAYS AFTER THE MASSACRE, Kyrgyz border guards further south allegedly handed over 86 Uzbeks against their will. If these were indeed refugees, then this was a violation of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, of which Kyrgyzstan is a signatory.

Uzbekistan had been loudly demanding the return of its citizens, accusing many of them of being terrorists and criminals. On 9 June, 16 asylum seekers were removed from the camp. Later the same day, as UNHCR staff tried frantically to intervene, four of them were handed over to the Uzbek authorities.

“Four people disappeared – this was the worst experience,” said a 45-year-old grandmother. “Then they

came and requested another group. We were frightened they were splitting the group up and picking them off that way – so we tried to stay together. We could see people on the hills with guns, and we were very worried – it brought back terrible memories.”

Kyrgyzstan itself was going through a period of political turmoil after the popular overthrow of President Akayev three months earlier, and the Uzbek asylum seekers were starting to get sucked into the various complex local and national political struggles taking place. Several senior government figures reacted angrily to the illegal forced return (or *refoulement*) of the four asylum seekers, blasting the nation's security services and saying they would launch an investigation. But the central government had other worries besides the international furore that broke out over the *refoulement*, including political assassinations and serious unrest in the southern city of Osh.

Meanwhile, the country's Prosecutor-General made a series of statements making it clear he agreed with his Uzbek counterpart and intended to send the refugees back under a bilateral extradition treaty (even though bilateral treaties are subordinate to international laws such as the 1951 Convention).

Hardly a day was passing without a threatening incident of some sort: on 14 June a group of local Kyrgyz villagers tried to break into the camp, screaming at the Uzbek asylum seekers to go home. When the police prevented them from entering, they threatened to return with 200 horsemen to drive the asylum seekers out of Kyrgyzstan. Two days after that, 16 buses packed with Uzbeks crossed the border and headed for the camp, apparently intent on forcing the asylum seekers home. The Kyrgyz authorities managed to intercept them.

Then, on the orders of the Prosecutor-General, another 17 asylum seekers were removed from the camp on 18 June and detained.

THE EXCLUSION ISSUE

THROUGHOUT THIS PERIOD, UNHCR was proceeding cautiously on the legal front. The charges against some of the asylum seekers were extremely serious and could not be dismissed out of hand. People guilty of very serious crimes can be excluded from refugee status under the terms of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

Three of the detainees had been photographed ushering the local Andijan prosecutor through the crowd in the square a few hours before the massacre. The prosecutor was killed later in the day. But the photographs do not provide any clear link to other actions that may have led to his death. According to the Uzbek authorities he was murdered by militants occupying a government building. According to most non-government witnesses, he was killed in the hail of gunfire fired by



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Uzbek soldiers as the crowd tried to use local officials as a human shield while they left the square.

The use of a human shield is also an act that may be classified as a serious crime, and so could lead to exclusion from refugee status. However, many have argued that in this case there were strong extenuating circumstances in that the leaders trying to protect the big crowd of civilians believed – with good reason – that it was their only hope of getting out of the square alive. After a painstaking examination of all the available evidence, and a series of interviews with the accused, UNHCR recognized them as refugees (along with one other difficult case). Earlier, the rest of the group had also been given *prima facie* refugee status under UNHCR’s mandate.

These decisions unlocked the door to a highly unusual humanitarian evacuation on 29 July, when a Boeing 747 chartered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) finally took off from Bishkek, heading for Romania. It was carrying all 425 refugees remaining in the camp as well as 14 of the detainees, who had been released hours earlier and rushed on a specially chartered plane from Osh to Bishkek.

TENSIONS SUBSIDE

IN TIMISOARA, THE TOWN IN WESTERN ROMANIA where the plane landed, smiles appeared on the faces of

the refugees from Andijan for the first time in a long time.

Behind the scenes, a tremendous scramble had taken place, at both political and practical levels, to prepare for their arrival. Once the idea of a humanitarian evacuation had crystallized after a visit to Kyrgyzstan by Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees Kamel Morjane at the end of June, two parallel searches had begun.

Even though the group was a small one, the planned operation was more or less unprecedented in its complexity. First, a country had to be found to take all the refugees. Given the circumstances in Kyrgyzstan, the evacuation had to be a one-off operation and would need to take place in great secrecy. And, to make the search for such a country easier, UNHCR also began sounding out resettlement countries, so that it could make a commitment to the transit country that the refugees would only be there temporarily.

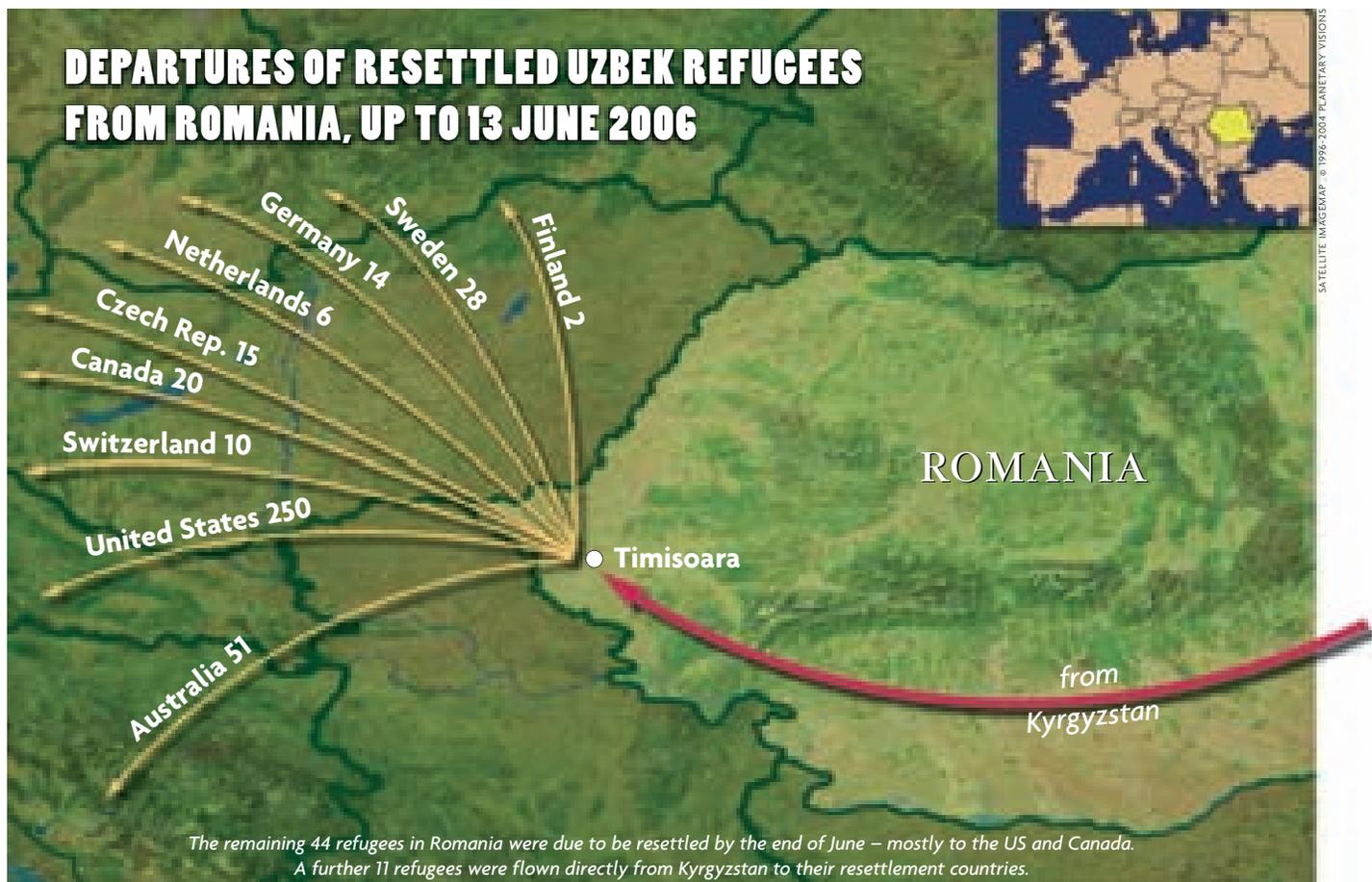
A number of options were examined – at one point consideration was even given to temporarily lodging the refugees on a large boat in the Caspian Sea, and simultaneous negotiations were taking place with a number of countries in eastern and central Europe, including Romania.

“When we started drafting the official agreement with the government and IOM, we left the number blank!” said UNHCR’s Representative in Romania,

A display of Uzbek dancing at the refugee centre in Timisoara. Earlier, Romanian folk dancers had showed their skills – one of many efforts by the Romanian authorities and local NGO Young Generation to entertain the refugees.

Hardly a day passed without a threatening incident of some sort.

DEPARTURES OF RESETTLED UZBEK REFUGEES FROM ROMANIA, UP TO 13 JUNE 2006



Veerapong Vongvarotai. “We had started talking of bringing around 25 people – and Romania had agreed in principle; then we went back and said ‘What about 50?’ Romania agreed to that too. We ended up with all 439. The Romanians were tremendously flexible.”

When 11 more of the detainees were released by the Kyrgyz authorities a month and a half later, they were flown direct to three different resettlement countries. Four other detainees – including the three men photographed with the Andijan prosecutor – were, however, still in custody at the beginning of June 2006, despite being recognized as refugees by UNHCR and receiving offers of a place by various resettlement countries.

Cristina Gaginsky, the Head of the OSCE, Council of Europe and Human Rights Department at the Romanian Foreign Ministry, explains why her country acted so positively: “The belief that human rights should be respected – this was the core belief that motivated the political rationale. The decision to have them in Romania was carefully analyzed, and the decisions

were that we were capable of doing that. All the assessments suggested they were qualified as refugees, and we acted on those assessments – acted as a responsible member of the international community.”

By making it clear they strongly supported Romania’s decision, other countries and the EU also played their part, Gaginsky said. This was a continuation of what they had done all along – from the ambassadors in Bishkek, right up to ministers and prime ministers, several of whom had made personal interventions at key moments.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

“RARELY HAS SUCH A SMALL GROUP OF REFUGEES received such wide-ranging support from so many influential officials and politicians,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, who also had a strong personal involvement, especially during the tense period leading up to and during the evacuation. “But without it, the story might have been very different. We are very grateful to all the countries and

“Rarely has such a small group of refugees received such wide-ranging support from so many influential officials and politicians.”

– ANTONIO GUTERRES

individuals who rallied round. It shows that, in some circumstances, the will to protect refugees is still very much alive. This was a true example of burden-sharing by states.”

Between August 2005 and June 2006, a lot happened – but in a much calmer environment. For one thing, a baby boy – Ismael – was born in October. He immediately acquired an extended family of 439 relatives and quasi-godparents, and helped them to start looking ahead instead of always dwelling on the past.

Meanwhile, as a prelude to resettlement, two UNHCR teams were conducting a further round of in-depth interviews with all the refugees, followed by teams from the resettlement countries themselves. By 13 June this year, 396 of the refugees had begun new lives in nine different resettlement countries, and the remaining 44 were due to leave before the end of the month.

The feedback from those who had already gone was positive. They missed their friends among the rest of the group, but generally things were going well: the children, who all went to Australia, seemed to have settled in happily and were “boasting of their accomplishments;” most of those who had gone to the US had got jobs already; the ones in European countries were studying the languages of their new countries and being well looked after.

The first group that went to Canada, just before the anniversary of the massacre, were overwhelmed by the generosity of their hosts: “They were crying when they told us these stories,” said one of the refugee women still in Romania. “They said no one showed them this respect in our own country.”

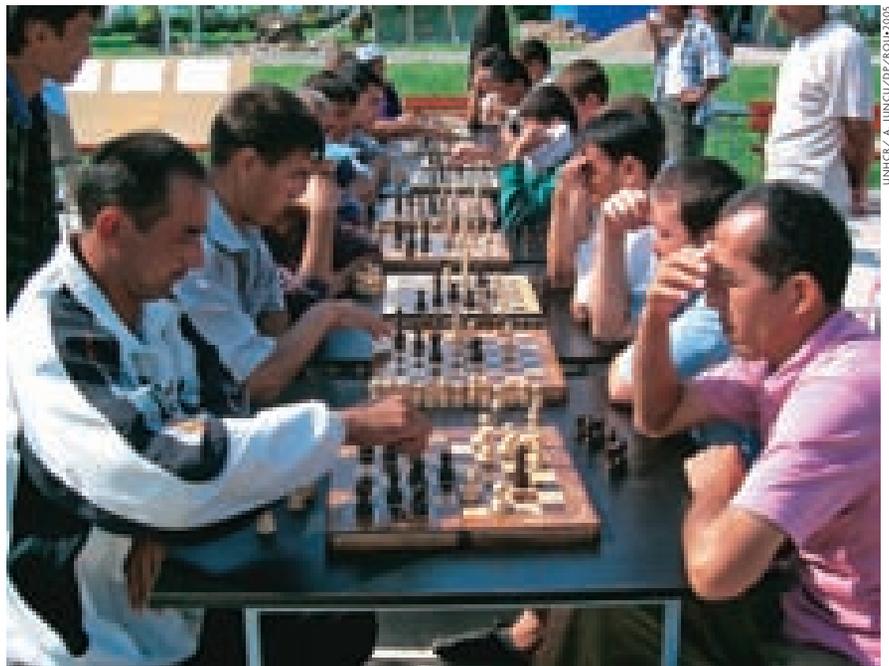
Timur telephoned one of the refugees who was resettled in the Czech Republic last October – the first time the country has taken resettlement cases. “The Czech authorities welcomed us and the people are very kind,” he said, adding that the living conditions are good and most of them have found jobs. “Learning the language has been the most difficult thing,” he said. And what had been their funniest experience so far? Pause. “When two Czechs meet in the street, they first of all greet each other’s dogs, then greet each other. We find this strange!”

MUCH APPRECIATED

AS THEIR NUMBERS IN ROMANIA DWINDLE, this very closely-knit group of refugees tell visitors of their gratitude to all those who helped them in Kyrgyzstan and Romania, particularly the local NGO, Young Generation, and the government administrator of the refugee centre in Timisoara, Livius Biscă, who managed to get the centre ready for them with only one day’s notice.

But perhaps the most poignant comment of all, by one of the group’s elders who is now living in the US, was filmed by Romanian television during a UNHCR seminar on International Human Rights Day:

“Until now we were afraid to open our mouths to say



UNHCR / A. JUNGCU/DFP/ROMA2005

something. We didn’t even know what human rights meant. But now, after spending this time with you – talking with you – we understand that we are human beings, and that we were born with certain rights. I understand that I can say what I think, without being arrested; that I can have certain convictions – philosophical, political, religious ones – so long as they don’t hurt anyone. We thank you for teaching us all these things.”

The small group that went to Romania represents a relatively rare example of what can be achieved when many different individuals, organizations and states pull together in the effort to protect refugees. As Romanian Foreign Ministry official Cristina Gaginsky said: in that respect, “It’s a good story.” ■

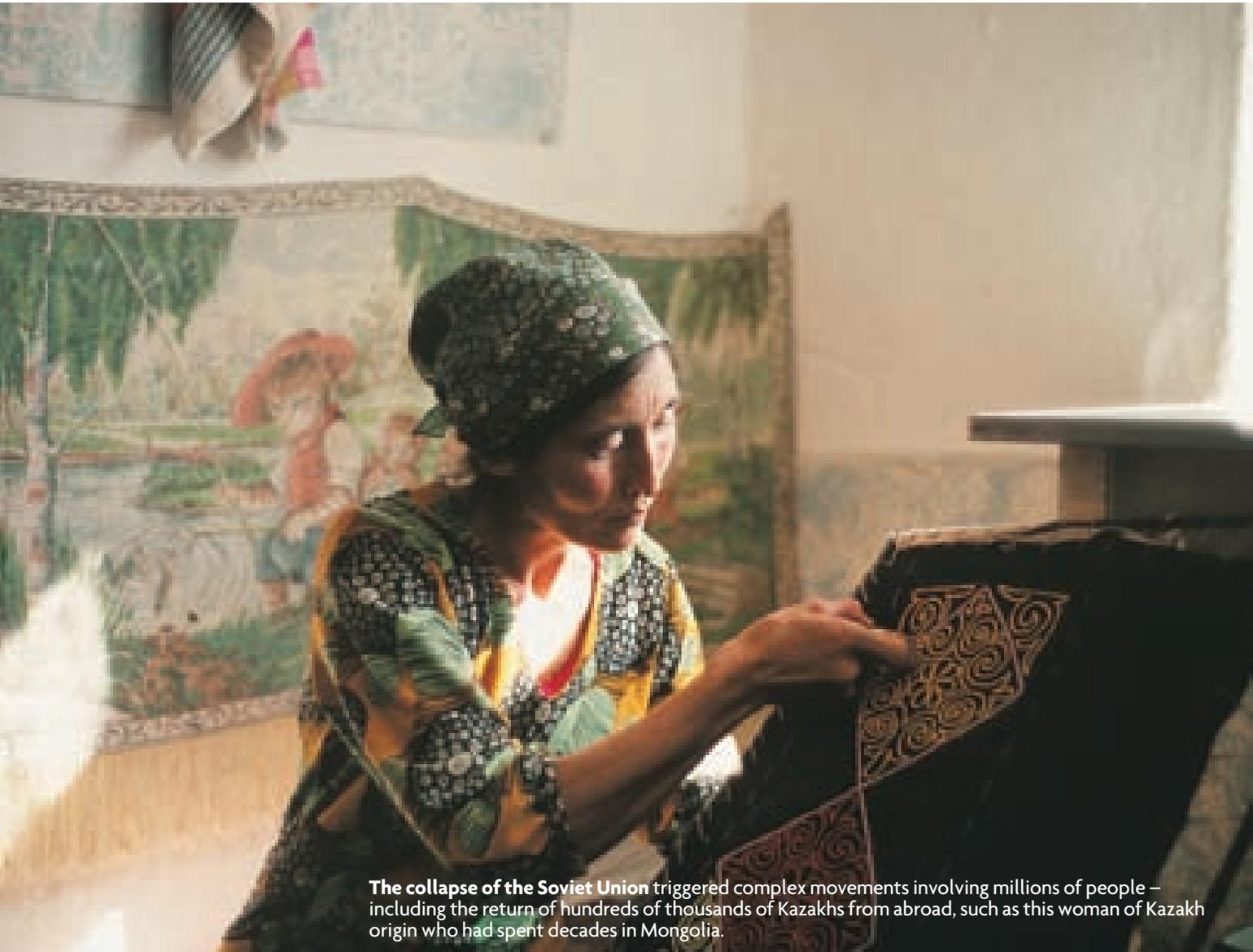
Uzbek refugees practising for a competition against local Romanian chess players in the refugee centre in Timisoara.



UNHCR / N. DOSMETOVA/DFP/ROMA2005

Ismael, born in Timisoara in October 2005, became the 440th Uzbek refugee in Romania.

Two Steps Forward, BUILDING



The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered complex movements involving millions of people – including the return of hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs from abroad, such as this woman of Kazakh origin who had spent decades in Mongolia.

BY VIVIAN TAN

WHEN THE SOVIET UNION disintegrated in 1991, millions of people in Central Asia started moving across new borders towards ancestral homelands or to seek refuge from the war in Tajikistan and simmering tensions elsewhere. The newly independent countries of Central Asia

lacked the laws and structures to deal with these mass, multidirectional population movements, and struggled to cope.

By 2005, the region had in many ways made considerable progress in the area of refugee legislation. All the Central Asian countries – bar Uzbekistan – have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have also passed national refugee

laws while Kazakhstan's is pending approval by Parliament.

Since UNHCR entered the region in 1993, one of its main tasks has been to help build asylum systems from scratch, and strengthen the authorities' capacity to handle related issues. The agency works with legal partners to sensitize and train government officials on refugee definitions, rights and obligations. The target audience

One Step Back

ASYLUM IN CENTRAL ASIA

UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/CS/AAZ/1995

includes border guards, migration officials, judges, prosecutors and officials from other government departments involved in asylum cases. In most of the countries, the legal structures are now in place. However, mindsets take time to change.

“It’s hard for lawyers working in the CIS countries because there is no tradition of respect for human rights and refugee law,” said Choplon Djakupova, who heads the legal clinic Adilet in Kyrgyzstan. “There’s not a single course on refugee law in local universities. With no knowledge, how can tomorrow’s judges make the right decisions?”

Denis Jivaga, a refugee coordinator at the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, concurred, adding, “Most public servants are not aware of who refugees are and what rights they have.”

For a few years, progress was steady, if sometimes a bit slow. But in the wake of the violent events in Andijan in May 2005 – the first major test since the end of the Tajik civil war – there are signs of that progress faltering.

In Kyrgyzstan, in particular, some aspects of the asylum system worked well under intense political

pressure – but others did not. On the plus side, most of the high-profile group of some 450 Uzbeks who sought refuge near Jalalabad, close to the Uzbek border, were not deported and are now starting new lives abroad. However, four members of this group were delivered back to the Uzbek authorities, and have not been heard of since.

In Kazakhstan, the response was also mixed. However, one of the most prominent

Uzbek human rights activists was resettled abroad after the Kazakh authorities released him from detention. Meanwhile the shockwaves emanating from Andijan reverberated beyond the immediate region, when the Russian Federation detained a number of Uzbeks, and Ukraine returned 11 asylum seekers to Uzbekistan in contravention of international law.

Some of these illegal deportations – or *refoulements* – may have been the result of ignorant or over-zealous security officials, or confusion between different branches of government, but they nevertheless mark an apparent step backwards by states that have signed the 1951 Convention.

“At the start of the crisis, the Kyrgyz authorities stopped registering the Uzbek asylum seekers,” said Adilet’s Djakupova in Bishkek. “They reversed the decision only after much lobbying. But if they could refuse to accept an asylum seeker once, they may just do it again. It’s become more dangerous for Uzbeks and the asylum regime as a whole has become less safe.”

Kyrgyzstan has been considered something of a trailblazer in the area of refugee law – one of the first countries in the region to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, and then back it up with a national refugee law. However, in May this year, Kyrgyzstan passed an amended refugee law with a definition of an asylum seeker that excludes foreigners who stay illegally in the country. If this provision leads to bona fide refugees being denied access to the refugee status determination process, it will violate the 1951 Convention.

On the other hand, when it comes to appeal cases, Kyrgyzstan’s Adilet has an enviable record – about 30 percent of its appeals are successful. It is a very different story in Tajikistan, where the Tajik Information Centre for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced People runs a legal clinic that tries to help rejected asylum seekers who want to appeal. “We submitted 80 appeal cases and have not won a single one,” said Khurshed Kodiekulov, a lawyer with the centre.

There have also been at least two cases of *refoulement* involving Afghans by the

Tajik authorities in the past couple of years.

“It’s not enough to just work with migration officials,” said Djakupova. “We started working with judges and the general prosecutor a few years ago. There was no success in court in the first two years. Results started showing only recently. The work has to be systematic – one or two trainings a year is not enough. And you have to accept that it’s a very slow process.”

At a time when geopolitics in the region are torn between the old “West,” a resurgent Russian Federation and a booming China, there are fears that Andijan and its aftermath may continue to affect the asylum regime. “Refugee protection is getting less legal, more political – not just in Kyrgyzstan, but in the whole world,” said Djakupova.

Recent events have to some extent shaken confidence in Central Asia’s developing asylum systems. Many Uzbeks in Osh are afraid to approach the Kyrgyz authorities for help because they fear deportation. The same goes for Chinese Uighurs in Kazakhstan.

It will take time and coordinated efforts to fully restore that trust. This summer, the European Commission will start a project to strengthen asylum capacity in Central Asia. In addition to monitoring the abuse of refugee rights, the project involves training government officials, and setting up reception centres and legal clinics in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Planned activities range from seminars on protection issues and statelessness, to summer school for university students and training for refugee law teachers.

Fifteen years after independence, the building of asylum institutions in Central Asia has reached a crossroads. Lying at the heart of the legendary Silk Road, the region has hosted endless flows of people over the centuries. But with its ethnic mosaic, wealth of natural resources and history of authoritarianism, this increasingly important region is also potentially explosive. One local conflict could easily trigger a bigger crisis, unleashing waves of people within the region. Whether the asylum laws and institutions are sufficiently mature and resilient to bear such a development remains to be seen. ■

Back to “the motherland”

BY VIVIAN TAN

THE WAY TO TAZE DURMUSH is rough – blazing sun, sprawling sands and a bumpy road to nowhere. Located on the eastern edge of the Karakum desert that sweeps through most of Turkmenistan, the town is cut off from the rest of the country by the river Amu.

But pull closer to Taze Durmush, and a mirage appears. Trees sway in the distance and shrubs sprout from the sand.

“The refugees have done wonders for this land,” said UNHCR field clerk Dovran Taganov. “They brought their knowledge of farming and improved the land. They turned it from desert to a tropical forest.”

A thousand refugees who fled Tajikistan’s civil war in the 1990s have planted roots in the Taze Durmush settlement. In August 2005, President Niazov decreed that all of the 9,500 ethnic Turkmen refugees from Tajikistan could become citizens of Turkmenistan. By June 2006, around 80 percent had already done so.

“The war drove us out, but helped us find our motherland,” said Gumaniyaz Aga of Babadurmaz, another settlement outside Ashgabat. “My whole village settled here, close to the mountains. It’s very similar to our Tajik villages and reminds us of our old home.”

When Aga arrived in 1992, he was given land, materials to build a house, seeds and farming tools. “Our melons are the sweetest around,” he boasts. His efforts have paid off – in 1996, his cotton harvest won him the President’s “For the Love of the Motherland” award.

“We brought four cows from Tajikistan – now we have 20,” added the 74-year-old farmer. His family has grown too: the original group of 15 has multiplied to include 36 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren.

Faizula Yakufov, who heads Taze Durmush, explains the settlement’s success: “Where there’s water, there’s life. The soil is free. The water, electricity, and gas are free. We grow enough for our own needs, and sell the surplus.”

KYRGYZ SETTLE DOWN

BUT LIFE WASN’T ALWAYS SO EASY for Tajik refugees in Central Asia. During the civil war, the minorities fled – including the Turkmen to Turkmenistan, the

for the local Kyrgyz and the Tajik Kyrgyz to get used to each other. “When we first came, the local community was not comfortable. But as time passed, we proved that refugees can work and earn money like normal people,” said Vahobjon Rasulov, who fled Sairon in Tajikistan in 1994.

In 1999, Rasulov started an NGO that has helped hundreds of Tajik refugees integrate in Kyrgyzstan via a range of projects. One of his main tasks is to facilitate his compatriots’ citizenship claims. The Kyrgyz Republic started naturalizing ethnic Kyrgyz refugees from Tajikistan in 2002. Since then, more than 8,000 have become Kyrgyz citizens.

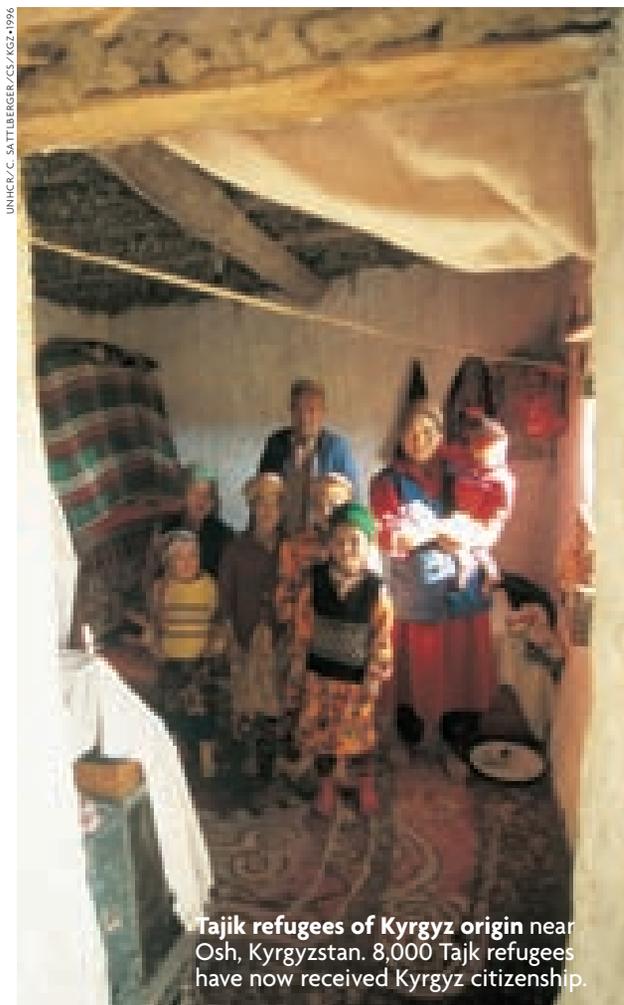
When Ismat Fayozov arrived in 1995, he bought a house with UNHCR support. He then went to Russia to work in construction, acquired a car and is now a taxi driver in Ivanovka, outside Bishkek, where about 700 refugees, mostly from Tajikistan’s mountainous Jirgital region, live.

“I’m sure 99 percent of the Tajiks will stay here. Only one percent – mostly old people – will repatriate,” he said. “In my dreams, I’m back in Tajikistan. But my children grew up here, so returning is not an option.”

Naturalization brings important practical benefits: “With citizenship, we now have a chance to vote,” said Mahmud Halnazarov, a religious leader in Et Bash settlement, eastern Turkmenistan. Other freshly acquired rights include access to higher education, and the right to travel freely.

In general, the new Turkmen citizens – like the Kyrgyz – are blending in well: “There’s no distinction between locals and refugees. We visit each other.

Sometimes there are marriages between settlements,” said Faizula Yakufov, at the oasis created by refugees in Taze Durmush. The brutal civil war that caused them to leave Tajikistan seems light years away. ■



Tajik refugees of Kyrgyz origin near Osh, Kyrgyzstan. 8,000 Tajik refugees have now received Kyrgyz citizenship.

Uzbeks to Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz through the Pamir mountains to Kyrgyzstan. In Uzbekistan, some 40,000 Tajik refugees of Uzbek origin have never been naturalized. And in Kyrgyzstan, it took time



REUTERS/G. GARANICU/DP/UKR/1998

A disenfranchised Crimean Tatar, who had not yet received Ukrainian citizenship, showing his old Soviet passport outside an election polling station on the Crimean Peninsula in 1998. The lack of valid residency and citizenship documents presented a huge problem for many groups in the newly independent CIS states.

Crapplying with Stalin's Legacy

BY BOHDAN NAHAJLO

WHAT LINKS IDAHO, TEXAS and Wisconsin with the mountainous area of Samtskhe-Javakheti on the border between Georgia and Turkey, the Krasnodar region of southern Russia, and the even more distant Ferghana Valley in Central Asia?

The answer is a pattern of intolerance towards the Meskhetian Turks that led to their forced displacement six decades ago under Stalin—a pattern repeated in different forms by others on several occasions since—and the latest of various attempts to find durable solutions for them.

Until recently, only specialists on the former Soviet Union had heard of the Meskhetians. Yet the arrival in the US of more than 9,000 of them from Russia's Krasnodar region in the 12 months up to June 2006—with another 3,000 expected shortly—reflects a belated broader international interest in the fate of one of the Soviet Union's former so-called "deported peoples."

Long before the term 'ethnic cleansing' was coined, Stalin's Soviet regime systematically displaced millions of people for a mix of political and supposedly strategic purposes. Eight entire ethnic groups, including the Meskhetians, Chechens, Ingush,

Crimean Tatars, and the USSR's sizable ethnic German minority were "deported" en masse in meticulously planned military operations, employing hundreds of train convoys and thousands of troops, to remote regions in Central Asia.

Tens of thousands died in the process. Considered ideologically suspect, the survivors were dispersed and forced to live under a punitive regime—often confined to specific limited zones (which nearly always fell a few kilometers short of the nearest town). The penalty for straying was 15-20 years hard labour in the Gulag camps.

SCARRED BY HISTORY

IN 1956, AFTER KHRUSHCHEV succeeded Stalin, five of the eight deported peoples were rehabilitated. Not surprisingly, after such a bizarre and bitter experiment in social and ethnic engineering, the issues surrounding the deported peoples did not fade quietly into history. Those who returned to their ancestral homes frequently encountered hostility from the authorities as well as from the new settlers who had been given their houses and lands, and tensions mounted.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an armed conflict broke out in October 1992 on the territory of the Russian Feder-

ation between the Ingush and the neighbouring North Ossetians, resulting in a new displacement of Ingush from the contested Prigorodny district. Then, at the end of 1994, the Chechens became involved in the first of their two wars against Moscow's control. Since then, this former "deported people" has produced the largest group of refugees flowing out of post-Soviet Russia—and the Russian Federation itself has also paid a heavy price in terms of lost lives.

For obscure reasons, despite the shift in policy under Khrushchev, the Crimean Tatars, Meskhetians and ethnic Germans were initially not allowed to return home. Eventually, many of the Germans were able to migrate to Germany, and decades of campaigning by the Crimean Tatars for the restoration of their rights also gradually brought success.

The Crimean peninsula had been resettled with a largely Russian population who—like most settler populations—were hostile to the idea of a return by the original inhabitants. When, during the twilight years of the USSR, a spontaneous Crimean Tatar repatriation movement got under way, political, social and economic confrontation between the two communities was inevitable.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 1990s, over 250,000 Crimean Tatars have

returned from exile to the peninsula, which is today part of independent Ukraine, and peace and relative stability have been preserved.

SCATTERED AND ABUSED

THE MESKHETIANS WERE LESS fortunate. Of the eight “peoples” deported in their entirety, they are the only ones who have never managed to go home. And sadly, 62 years after an estimated 100,000 of them were forcibly removed from their historical homeland in Georgia, some of the scattered survivors and descendants are still in need of protection.

In 1999, the biggest community of exiled Meskhetians—some 74,000 living in the Uzbek portion of the Ferghana Valley—became involved in a vicious outbreak of inter-ethnic violence. Around 100 are believed to have been killed during two weeks of fighting, and the rest were then evacuated *en masse* by the Soviet army. With their return to Soviet Georgia still blocked, most of them settled in Azerbaijan, while others tried to start new lives in different parts of Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Post-Soviet Georgia, which has had to deal with substantial internal displacement since the late 1980s, was reluctant to welcome back the Meskhetians. The entire issue of their return and “rehabilitation” has remained politicized, not only because the Georgians are Christians while the Meskhetians are Muslims and “Turkicized,” but also because another minority—Armenians—have since settled in the

Samtskhe-Javakheti area and opposed Meskhetian repatriation.

The conditions of the twice-dispersed Meskhetians have differed from one country to another. In Azerbaijan, an estimated 48,000 Meskhetians who fled from the Ferghana Valley had, by 1998, been allowed to acquire citizenship and integrate. Likewise, in Ukraine an estimated 9,000 of them have been naturalized. Relatively little is known about the Meskhetians who remain in Central Asia or about those who migrated to Turkey.

In some parts of the Russian Federation, Meskhetians have acquired citizenship and enjoy the same rights as others. However, in the Krasnodar region, they have never been accepted by the local authorities and have suffered from blatant ethnic discrimination. As a result, many of the 17,000 who ended up there in effect became stateless: no official status, deprived of even the most basic

rights, and subject to constant xenophobic pressure from local Cossack organizations.

“They break into our houses,” said Sarvar Tedorov, a local Meskhetian leader. They humiliate us and call us names. The beatings are regular.” Interventions on behalf of his community by Russian human rights NGOs and the central Russian authorities have failed to persuade the local authorities to alter their attitudes and policies.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

IN THE MID 1990s, INTERNATIONAL interest began to focus on those deported peoples who were having trouble returning home. UNDP and UNHCR became involved in assisting the Ukrainian authorities cope with the legal, political and socio-economic challenges stemming from the return of tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars. And in 1996, the Geneva Conference

A group of Meskhetian girls in Pennsylvania, shortly after being resettled to the United States from the Russian Federation.



A Crimean Tatar boy has his photograph taken for an application for Ukrainian citizenship.



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on forced displacement and migration in the CIS region, organized by UNHCR, IOM and the OSCE/ODIHR, recognized the formerly deported peoples as a category of concern and provided a multilateral framework in which to address their problems.

Subsequently, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Council of Europe, UNHCR, and NGOs such as the Open Society Institute's Forced Migration Projects began to work together to better understand and solve the problems.

In Crimea, UNHCR and the High Commissioner on National Minorities helped the Ukrainian authorities and the Crimean Tatar leadership run a major campaign to ensure that Crimean Tatar returnees were not left stateless. By the end of 2001, 95 per cent of them had acquired Ukrainian citizenship.

The Crimean Tatars have been able to make headway in getting re-established on the Crimean peninsula and gained parliamentary representation in the Ukrainian and Crimean parliaments. But issues connected with land, property and access to the benefits of privatization, without which full reintegration will be impeded, have not been fully resolved. And the negative stereotypes of the Crimean Tatars, which were officially promoted for decades, are still all too prevalent.

HELP AT LAST

IN 1999, THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE made the eventual orderly return and reintegration of those Meskhetians who wished to go home one of the conditions for Georgia's accession to the organization. In practice, there has been little progress so

far. But with a new Georgian government in place since the 2004 Rose Revolution, the prospects may have improved. Legislation and a state programme for the resettlement of Meskhetians are apparently close to completion.

The situation of the Meskhetians in Krasnodar has remained problematic. The initiative to resettle them in the US is a bold and generous response aimed at breaking the impasse and producing a lasting solution to their predicament. But it has also drawn criticism from unexpected quarters: representatives of the respected Russian human rights organization, Memorial, for example, have described it as a form of soft ethnic cleansing which rewards the local authorities' wish to rid the area of "undesirable" ethnic groups.

On the other hand, the increasingly desperate Meskhetians who have decided to take up the offer of resettlement in the US appear relieved and grateful. "It's impossible to live here," said 35-year-old Rustam Zautadze before leaving for Baltimore. Sarvar Tedorov agrees fully: "We simply have no other way out. We must save our children and future."

According to Aaron Tate of the Interfaith Ministries in Houston, the resettlement is proceeding successfully and local Turkish communities have been very helpful. The refugee families themselves, he said, are "warm, appreciative, and incredibly hospitable – which makes it easier for them to form relationships with members of the local community."

It is a sentiment shared by other NGOs charged with helping them to settle in: "The resettlement of the Meskhetian Turks has been a positive experience for the affiliate communities that have been involved," said Joseph Roberson, of the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Programme for New York City.

Nowadays, when forcible transfers of population involving mass violation of human rights are regarded as clear-cut crimes against humanity, it is sobering to discover that these early and largely obscure twentieth century examples still require attention and, in some cases, solutions. ■

Despite Khrushchev's shift in policy, the Crimean Tatars, Meskhetians and ethnic Germans were still not allowed home.

ACROSS THE The Mauritanian

All around, the sparse savannah reaches out to an endless horizon under a burning sun. The Antenne-Dabaye refugee settlement seems lost in a landscape where time and space have little meaning. Yet, it was here in northern Senegal that thousands of Mauritanians settled in 1989, after a border conflict between Mauritania and Senegal led to confrontations between the various communities and dozens of deaths on both sides. Seventeen years on, some 20,000 Mauritanians are still living in dozens of sites scattered along the south side of the Senegal River which marks the border between the two countries. They arrived with hardly any possessions, but soon became involved in a range of activities, including animal breeding, agriculture and small businesses. Even though they have strong fraternal bonds with the local population – strengthened by a common way of life and family links forged over the centuries along the banks of the

river – tensions still exist. After a number of years, some of the refugees decided to leave – either returning spontaneously to Mauritania, or moving abroad. In 1996, in order to assist the 35,000 people who went back to Mauritania, UNHCR set up a Special Programme of Rapid

Reintegration, for the construction of essential infrastructure such as schools, clinics and irrigation systems, as well as the rehabilitation of reception centres and running of micro-projects. For the remaining refugees, the precise conditions of return remain a burning issue. For them, the Senegal River has acquired extra symbolism: representing something that is so close, yet since 1989 has remained unattainable; as a border which was for so long an abstract concept – given the free-flowing traffic between the two banks – but which suddenly became all too well defined; and as a physical entity they still have to cross in order to close this chapter of their history. On 3 August 2005, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy came to power in Mauritania, a shift in the political environment that may present an opportunity to find a fair and lasting solution. Once again all eyes are fixed on the river – and what lies on the other side.



SATELLITE IMAGEMAP © 1996-2004 PLANETARY VISIONS

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BY CÉCILE POUILLY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURENT GESLIN

THE RIVER

refugees in Senegal



A Mauritanian refugee re-enacts the painful episode in 1989, when thousands of Mauritanian refugees swam or paddled across the Senegal River in dug-out canoes.



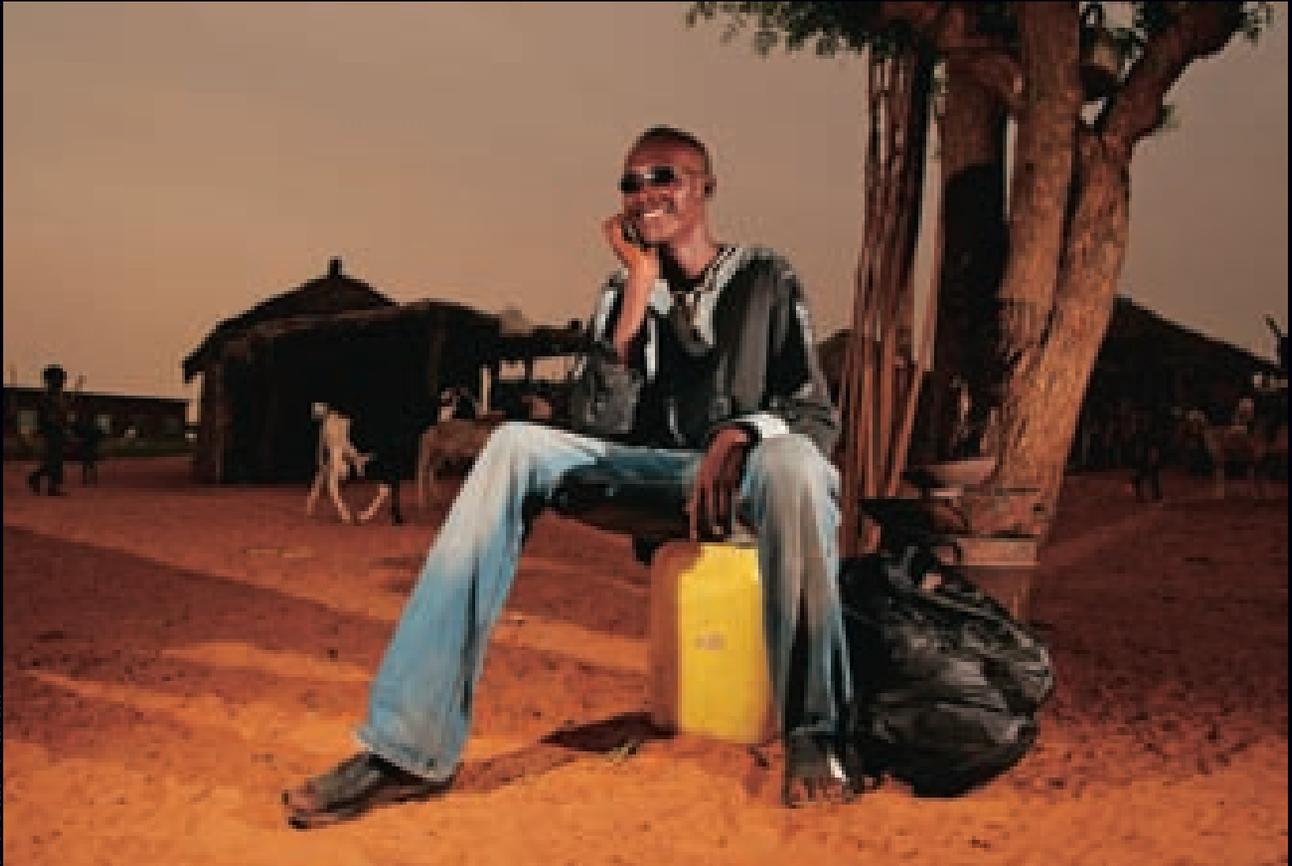
As the group has now spent 17 years in exile, the children know no other home but Senegal.



The refugees built shelter in accordance with their various traditions, using either adobe or a mix of straw and clay on a frame of branches. Here, refugees from the nomadic Peule people have created huts surrounded by an enclosure to keep out the animals.

UNHCR/L. GEBLIN/DP/SEN/2005

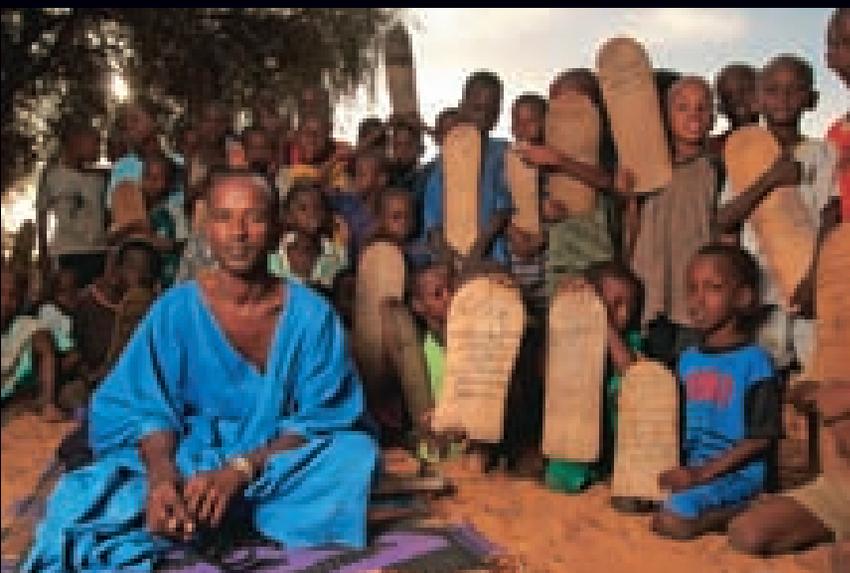
ACROSS THE RIVER



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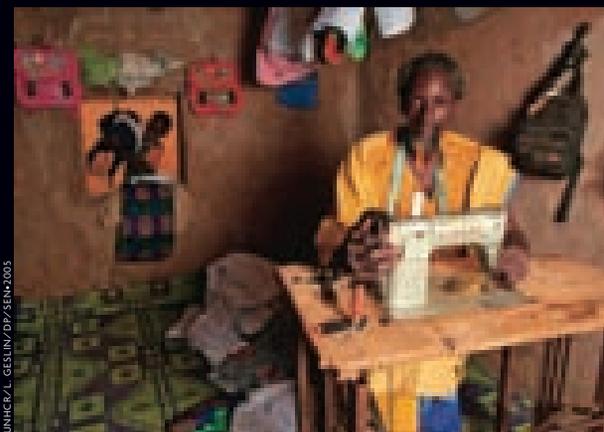
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Many younger refugees have made the difficult decision to return to Mauritania. Here a former refugee – who now works in an internet café in the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott – returns to visit the refugee settlement where he lived for 14 years.



UNHCR/L. GESLIN/DP/SEN*2005

Some settlements have Quranic schools, where the children not only learn about religion but also have a chance to socialize with each other.



UNHCR/L. GESLIN/DP/SEN*2005

Over the years, many refugees have managed to establish small businesses. This man has become a successful tailor, employs an apprentice, and has expanded his market to include Senegalese living outside the settlement.

ACROSS THE RIVER



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Many of the Peule nomads were unable to take their cattle with them when they crossed the river and now mostly look after cattle owned by local Senegalese. Some luckier ones managed to keep their own herds, and live almost entirely off the meat and milk that they produce.



UNHCR/L. GESLIN/DP/SEN-2005

The entire existence of the peoples in this region – whether refugee or not – is centred on the river. Here, a refugee looks across from the Senegalese bank at his original home village. Some refugees go back and forth across the river to carry out commercial activities or to visit relatives, but continue to live in Senegal because they believe the conditions for their return are not yet satisfactory.



UNHCR/L. GESLIN/DP/SEN-2005

Parents have tried to balance constructing a traditional home life for their children in the refugee settlements, while preserving the sentiment that they belong elsewhere.

O B I T U A R Y

NABIL BAHJAT ABDULLA 16 July 1957– 28 March 2006

UNHCR staff member killed in action in south Sudan.

NABIL BAHJAT ABDULLA died in a Nairobi hospital on 28 March, two weeks after he was shot during an attack in Yei, south Sudan.

Nabil, a 48-year old Iraqi national, was shot three times in the stomach on 15 March, after two armed intruders entered the UNHCR compound. A local guard and one of the attackers were also killed and a second guard was wounded. Six other UNHCR international staff, who were in the compound at the time, escaped injury.

Despite a degree in civil engineering, Nabil began his UNHCR career in Baghdad in 1991 as a driver. He was subsequently promoted to senior logistics clerk in the agency's Baghdad office. In October 2005, he went on mission to south Sudan, where the agency is preparing for the possible return of up to 350,000 Sudanese refugees from neighbouring countries. His wife and four children remained behind in Iraq.

"I first met Nabil in April 2003 in Baghdad," said Gigi Principe, a UNHCR colleague who was also working in south Sudan at the time Nabil was shot. "After the 19 August bombing that killed Sergio Vieira de Mello and many other UN colleagues, Nabil had the courage to come to work the next day, even though all national staff were told to stay at home. Nabil went to the office to find out how we were and to offer his assistance. This attitude was typical of his caring and thoughtful nature."

The day after he died, UNHCR staff around the world held ceremonies and observed a minute's silence. Addressing staff at the organization's headquarters in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres said "We have lost an excellent and brave colleague... Once again, the humanitarian community is mourning a friend and colleague who died trying to help others in a place

that has already seen far too much sadness and violence. All of us at UNHCR mourn Nabil's death and we extend our deepest condolences to his family. We pay tribute to his life, and his sacrifice will never be forgotten."

Nabil's death brings the total number of UNHCR staff members killed in the line of duty since 1990 to at least 22.

"As I watched Nabil fight for his life in a Nairobi hospital, I could not but think of the ironies life shows us," said Principe. "He had left the dangers of Baghdad only to be shot in south Sudan. But until the end, Nabil acted to ensure the well-being of colleagues, by trying to shield them from attack."



UNHCR

UNHCR's Refworld 2006 (issue 15)

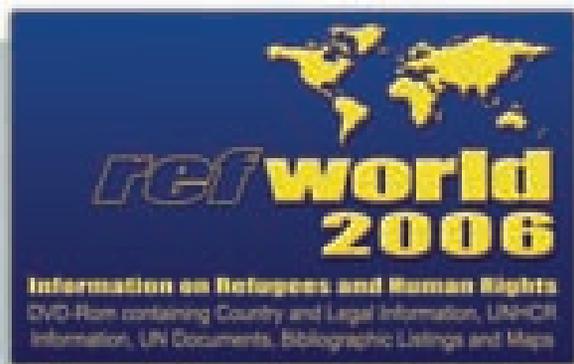
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