

CONFLICT

Trouble in the suburbs

Shanyrak, the dark side of post-Soviet development in Kazakhstan

ALMATY (TCA). Not all is well in the city of Almaty, lauded as an economic giant in the region, a model of expedient privatization and post-Soviet development.

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Reality check lies only a few miles outside the city center where a growing movement of discontent among those left behind by the recent boom tells a very different story and reveals a country developing on the shaky foundations of corruption and disparity.

Economic schizophrenia

«The oil boom provided enormous wealth,» says Yevgeniy Zhovtis, founder of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, «but it only happened for some and they are concentrated here in the city. Economically speaking, in Almaty you are Europe, but ten kilometers outside of the center, you are in Asia.»

Nowhere is the economic and cultural schizophrenia of Kazakhstan more pronounced than in the embattled community of Shanyrak on the fringes of Almaty. Here over 100,000 poor and working class people have found themselves pitched against a government determined to sell their property to the highest bidder - in this case a developer looking to build a water park - and clashing with police squads sent to forcibly push residents out. Ironically, it was this very government that less than a decade ago helped create Shanyrak.

When the Soviet Union fell and Kazakhstan became an independent nation in 1991 there was a concerted effort on the part of the newly formed government to integrate ethnic Kazakhs, many of whom lived in

far flung rural regions, into urban centers dominated by ethnic Russians. Those lured by promises of cheap land in the outskirts of cities like Almaty bought modest plots from local officials and set to work building new lives in a brand new country.

But alongside rapid development and oil prosperity, a culture of corruption has also flourished. With real estate prices in Almaty now rivalling those of many European cities, the city's government has decided to reclaim surrounding land for resale to buyers wealthier than migrating Kazakhs driven from their villages by a collapse of rural industries and infrastructure.

Spirit of resistance

Government officials now claim that local people sold them the land illegally. Others, who have squatted land here for years by paying out regular small bribes, have no assurance of long-term legal rights to the property they've developed. This conflict came to a head two and a half months ago when police arrived with sledgehammers and bulldozers.

This spirit of resistance has grown throughout Almaty's unincorporated communities, often referred to as «settlements,» which are home to almost ten percent of the city's population. The past year has brought an onslaught of demolitions and battles with police, with over one hundred houses destroyed, but it has also fostered a sense of solidarity, forming these communities into a cohesive political force.

Their growing movement has gained support from opposition parties who see such disenfranchised citizens as a po-



Many people in Shanyrak feel left behind. Often having put in decades of work on Soviet farms in rural areas, they now find their needs ignored by the government.

tential constituency - especially in light of last year's revolution in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which was largely fuelled by similarly disenfranchised rural populations and citizens frustrated by government corruption. Public sympathy has also been strong, and private companies have refused to perform demolitions, meaning that police, or even city prosecutors have had to swing the sledgehammers themselves.

Law serving the wealthy

Recent legislation, to take effect in July, will officially secure land rights for current inhabitants of properties in Almaty. While there is hope that this may alleviate some of the problems in the settlements, residents fear that the new law is intended only to protect the rich. Many say it was passed to serve the wealthy who land-grabbed in the immediate wake of the Soviet collapse, and will not be enforced in favour of

settlement residents unable to offer substantial bribes to politicians and officials.

Twenty miles across town 40 people lie on iron bed frames, their pale faces illuminated in blue by the tarp that shelters them. Their headbands, torn from tablecloths and t-shirts, announce the name of their community - Bakai. They are entering their second week on a hunger strike.

Police stormed their settlement on February 21 while most residents were gathered outside of the town celebrating a local holiday. When word spread that the police were attacking their homes, Bakai residents fought back with whatever they had: burning tires, sticks, and rocks. They even tried to keep their houses together by padlocking large chains around them, and climbed on to the roofs so the police would be forced to knock them down before proceeding with the demolition. Many Bakai citizens were

wounded and arrested. It is not only recent migrants to Almaty who are suffering under a new economy of runaway development and rampant corruption.

Paradoxically, the very private-property rights issues that spelled the collapse of the Soviet Union have now become a battleground between rich and poor in this post-Soviet state. When the Soviet Union fell, powerful party members quickly made the transition to become the wealthy elite of independent Kazakhstan, employing the same tactics under a new banner.

«Our officials absolutely don't care about us ordinary people,» says Bendzya, a local resident, as she sits at her picnic table amidst her cherry trees. Bendzya has been one of the community's leaders in the legal battles to bury the power line.

«Prices go up, others get rich, and we see no benefits. Our only choice is to fight for ourselves.»

DRUG

Dog training helps curb drug trafficking

ALMATY (IRIN). Border drug detection teams from Central Asia are being trained to use sniffer dogs in counter-narcotics operations near the Kazakh commercial capital, Almaty.

«During the course participants are learning skills on how to train and use sniffer dogs in searching for and detecting drugs and explosives,» Ruslan Kovalev, head of the Kazakh border service's unit working with dogs, said from the training facility.

Central Asia is reeling from the burgeoning opium trade from Afghanistan. The amount of drugs seized on the Tajik-Afghan border in the first three months of this year increased

by 27 percent, Tajikistan's foreign minister, Talbak Nazarov, said.

Twenty-five border guards from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are taking part in the training, which is being supported by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

«Each border guard has got a dog that he will undergo training with and then take the dog back to work with him,»

Kovalev explained, adding that 25 dogs were purchased for the training.

The training has already had results. Khabibullo Odinov, a Tajik border guard who attended the training last year near Almaty, impounded more than a kilogram of heroin with the help of his dog Rex in the Ishkashim part of Tajikistan's Afghan border in the east of the country in March.

According to Kovalev, the training of one sniffer dog takes between three and six months. «In 2003, we had a case when a dog sniffed out a kilogram of heroin hidden in the footwear of a woman,» the border official said. Adylbek

Omurkulov, a border guard at Kyrgyzstan's main Manas airport, told IRIN that it was difficult to detect drugs and detain traffickers without special equipment or trained dogs.

«The dogs help us a lot in seizing drugs. It is impossible to detect them through any other means because the way drug traffickers disguise narcotics has become very sophisticated,» Omurkulov said.

He gave an example of traffickers trying to tie packs with drugs to the bellies of hundreds of sheep and then drive them across the border.

«Others smuggle drugs in petrol tanks or fruit. There are some car service stations where

whole panel trucks are converted for drug smuggling,» Omurkulov added.

Yuriko Shoji, UNDP Resident Representative in Kazakhstan, said security was of utmost importance in Central Asia, as the region was gaining importance as a transport hub between Asia and Europe.

In an effort to tackle the issue, the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) were launched in partnership with the EU, with the overall budget over the period of nine years for the five Central Asian countries of \$55 million.