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For Russia’s Migrants, Economic Despair Douses Flickers of Hope

Mikhail Galustov for The New York Times

Chelobityevo, an industrial wasteland outside Moscow, is home to migrant workers living in tattered shacks.

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CHELOBITYEVO, Russia — The tattered shacks of a shantytown for migrant workers are huddled in the shadow of a nuclear power plant here, just outside sprawling Moscow’s last ring road.

A naked bulb flickers on and off in one, a modified shipping crate that serves as the home of Avaz Akhatov and his family. Despite the frigid evening, the air inside is stifling from the heat of a wood-fired stove and the body heat from his two young sons, wife and sister, all of whom live in a space no larger than a walk-in closet.

The conditions are miserable, Mr. Akhatov, a 44-year-old laborer from Tajikistan, admits. And they are getting worse.

Marginalized and maligned in the best of times, Russia’s millions of migrants are facing increasing hardship as the country enters its worst economic decline since the 1998 ruble collapse. Recruited in droves mostly from former Soviet republics in Central Asia to build shopping malls,
skyscrapers and luxury homes during Russia's decade-long economic boom, migrant workers now top 10 million people by some estimates, giving Russia the second largest immigrant population in the world, trailing only the United States.

Work on construction sites or renovations in private homes, the two most lucrative migrant professions, are becoming more scarce and employers are increasingly withholding wages for work already completed, leaving migrants increasingly desperate.

Many now live directly on construction sites inside the structures they are building. Others find shelter in ragged shacks cobbled together from particleboard and scraps of sheet metal and lumped together to form ghettos like the one here in Chelobityevo.

Russian officials, themselves besieged by the effects of the economic crisis, are mostly concerned with reining in the number of migrants to preserve jobs for Russian citizens.

Pressed by the gathering economic crisis, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, while acknowledging Russia's dependence on migrant labor, has called for quotas on work permits for migrants to be temporarily cut in half.

For all that, Mr. Akhatov says, opportunities in Russia are still better than they are back home.

"You work and earn 100 rubles, 200 rubles, 500 rubles, and you can feed yourself," the equivalents of $3 to $15 for a day's labor, Mr. Akhatov said. "But in Tajikistan, you couldn’t make 500 rubles in a year."

Mr. Akhatov has decided to stay if he can — to work for a pittance, suffer extortion from employers and the police and live in fear of racist attacks — just like many of Russia's millions of other migrant workers, whose lives are mired in similar penury but who have little hope of surviving in their homelands.

"People have no alternative for making money," said Bakhrom Khamroyev, an ethnic Uzbek who has become a leading advocate for immigrant rights in Russia. "There is no source other than Russia right now."

From here, Moscow, with its expensive cars, boutiques and restaurants, is just barely visible as an orange glow in a cloudy evening sky. Power lines crisscross overhead with the incessant buzz of electricity moving from the nearby nuclear power plant to the city.

At Mr. Akhatov's home, water for tea boils in a bucket on the wood-fired stove as friends and acquaintances come in to talk. They now spend much of their days listlessly, waiting for regular work.

"I have family there — 15 people," Aleksandr Babokhonov said of his life back in Tajikistan. "They need to be clothed, they need to be fed, but with what?” he asked. "There is now enough money only for food."

Increasing attacks by aggressive nationalists also weigh on their minds, as jobs grow scarcer and a public backlash against migrant labor gains strength. A Moscow-based human rights group recently announced that 10 people had been killed in what were apparently racist attacks just since the start of the year.

On top of these problems, migrants often find themselves at the mercy of the police, who can confiscate cash and other valuables on seemingly any pretext, or without reason at all, experts and witnesses said.
In the last few months, police officers have raided the shantytown at Chelobityevo several times, witnesses said, ostensibly to check for illegal migrants. As often as not, however, legal status is no guarantee of protection.

“Even when all your documents are in order, they can beat you and take your money,” Mr. Khamroyev said. “It’s not helpful to be here legally.”

In a recent raid, witnesses said, that about a dozen men were made to strip to their underwear in frigid temperatures and burn their clothing when they could not produce enough cash.

Once, the police went into a makeshift mosque during a Muslim holiday and beat and arrested those praying inside. In another recent raid, police officers confiscated presents that had been bought as New Year’s gifts for family members back home, residents said.

Frequently, those who do not pay are put to work doing manual labor at police stations or at the homes of officers, the migrant workers said. Passports and work permits are also frequently confiscated, subjecting migrants to further legal hassles and allowing the police another excuse for bribes.

Mr. Akhatov was buying his two children clothes at the market recently when police officers detained all three, accusing them of having false documents. The charge was confirmed by a police official, though Mr. Akhatov says his papers are in order.

His children, Ilkhom, 5, and Idibek, 8, became feverish from several hours spent in detention, and the police have confiscated Mr. Akhatov’s passport.

“They said they’d deport me,” Mr. Akhatov said. “I don’t know what to do.”