Tajikistan 'On The Road To Failure,' Think Tank Concludes

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(RFE/RL) -- Tajikistan is at risk of social unrest and its government is in danger of collapse.

That's the warning in a new report by the International Crisis Group, a prominent Brussels think tank. It says the near collapse of the country's energy infrastructure and a sharp drop in money sent home by migrant workers are among the country's most severe problems.

The report says the West had hoped Tajikistan would be a bulwark against the spread of extremism from Afghanistan. Instead, it says Tajikistan is looking increasingly like its neighbor -- a weak state that is suffering from a failure of leadership.

The group says Tajikistan lacks the normal elements that would help hold up a regime -- functioning government and infrastructure, a population able to earn its living, and the confidence of the international community.

"We do not mean the regime is going to collapse tomorrow," says Paul Quinn-Judge, the ICG's Central Asia project director. "What we are saying is that the structures that provide for a viable and long-lasting regime do not appear to be apparent in Tajikistan right now. It has massive problems all along the spectrum -- with its infrastructure, with its social and health policies, with the collapse, essentially, of their social and health policies, with the collapse of the electricity system."

In recent years hundreds of thousands of Tajiks have left to find work, mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but last year the ICG says probably more than 1 million people -- a figure much higher than that given by officials -- were abroad.

'Economic Lifeline'

The money they sent home equaled about half the country's total economic output.

That gave President Emomali Rahmon what the group called an "economic lifeline" that was convenient politically, too, since those who left were most likely to oppose the regime.

But those jobs are now drying up as the economic crisis bites, and large numbers of migrant workers are returning home.

That presents a double whammy for the country. Remittances are set to decline sharply, and the migrants are coming back to swell the ranks of the unemployed.

The ICG says some 70 percent of Tajikistan's population lives in poverty in the countryside and that hunger is now spreading even to previously prosperous cities.

'Reforms Very Fast'

Quinn-Judge says that without sweeping reforms the government is in danger of collapse.

"There needs to be fundamental reforms very fast. These are reforms in governance, in the way that the country is governed," he says. "These are
reforms in transparency, how money is spent that is given to Tajikistan or goes into the Tajik budget, a reorientation of priorities from a very small number of state-owned enterprises to job creation, to support of the people in the countryside.

"[There are] issues like the poverty level of the country, which is, as you well know, extremely high, enormous unemployment, and worse unemployment coming with the return of migrant laborers," Quinn-Judge added.

Not everyone agrees with the report's findings.

Saifullo Safarov is an analyst at the Center for Strategic Studies, a think tank affiliated with the Tajik president's office.

"There are issues that are not under control -- for instance, fighting corruption is a very difficult task. But the Tajik government has been strongly fighting against corruption. Tajikistan has also been successful in structural reforms. That's why I can't agree with this ICG group that is trying to create crisis itself."

The ICG report comes as the U.S. intelligence chief said the global economic crisis was the top security concern of the United States, partly because of the risk of rising political instability.

Dennis Blair said Tajikistan would be "severely affected" by the crisis and the loss of migrant remittances posed "increased threats to its internal stability."

RFE/RL's Tajik Service contributed to this report.

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