Central Asia

I. General trends

The Republics of Central Asia have a common history: they belonged to the USSR and they are very interdependent because of the way natural resources are shared out throughout the region. Kirghizstan and Tajikistan hold the water resources of Central Asia while Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have natural gas and oil. At the same time, the authoritarian regimes in power in these new states are striving to become autonomous, more independent, to strengthen their identity and to no longer be dependant upon their neighbors. The fact that they have given the highest priority to their national interests largely explains the failure of regional organizations aiming at economic integration, such as the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation, the Eurasian Economic Community, or the Economic Cooperation Organization… However, these countries do agree on questions of security, on the “fight against terrorism”, against separatism and for safe borders...

Since the 1990s, they have opened their frontiers. Though the area seemed little concerned by migrations before then, in actual fact, there was a great deal of internal migration for political reasons (transportation under Stalin) and for economic reasons (particularly towards the mining and steel complexes of Kazakhstan). Therefore, the new factor is rather the opening of their outer borders.

At the beginning of the 1990s, many peoples who were not citizens of the ethno-republics left these countries. They were mainly Slavs (from Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus), Germans, Tatars, etc. They left to avoid conflicts (civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997), political crises (that led to authoritarian and/or dictatorial regimes), economic crises (factories closing down), deterioration of education, job discrimination (because of “national preference”) but also because of a colonial reflex (a combination of a feeling of frustrated superiority and disparaging local language and culture). The governments of the new republics did not encourage people to leave for this meant losing managers, technicians, scientists and intellectuals. So they rather reluctantly took political measures to encourage people to remain: accepting Russian as a second official language or as lingua franca (in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan) or double nationality. These migrants did not feel very welcome in Russia or were disappointed so that many went back to Central Asia. The migratory movements leveled out in the second half of the 1990s despite a few later increases due to political events (such as the revolution in Kirghizstan in 2005).

At present, there is a trend to more and more diversified and interconnected migrations, involving both men and women, legal and illegal moves, departure for economic, political and humanitarian reasons (refugees and asylum seekers). There is also some confusion between migrants and refugees for many potential refugees choose to find job, particularly illegally, in the informal sector (work in the bazaars, small trade, etc.) Systems governing asylum, when they exist, are based on strong political reasons that

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hail back to the Soviet system. The agreements on judicial cooperation signed between the states of the region take little account of their international commitments as regards the protection of refugees; there is therefore great danger of these being rejected as in the case of the deportation of refugees and asylum seekers from Uzbekistan in Kirghizstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Georgia. Uzbekistan is the only one of these countries that is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention or the 1967 Additional Protocol on refugee status.

Central Asia has known many conflicts that have been called inter-ethnic or inter-religious. Most often, however, they are due to reasons of appropriation of economic and political power, which may make use of different ethnic or religious identities without being their primary cause. This strife affects the whole region. There were pogroms in Uzbekistan before the USSR broke up; events occurred in Uzgen in Kirghizstan in 1991; civil war broke out in Tadjikistan and massacres at Andijan in Uzbekistan in May 2005 that had repercussions in the whole region. The area is also affected by the situation in Afghanistan, particularly because there are many Afghan refugees – ethnic Uzbeks, Tadjiks or Turkmens – in Central Asia. It could also become a new hunting ground for radical Islam (from Afghanistan and Pakistan) but also, and even more, a tool of religious extremism (mainly Hizb-ut-Tahir) for the ruling authorities.

Central Asia is also an important transit zone for trafficking in human beings because of its favorable location between Europe and Asia, and between developed and developing countries. There is also the weight of poverty and unemployment, the lack of laws on migratory movements, borders that are difficult to control (deserts and mountains), corruption and the age-old, well-practiced routes of drug trafficking... Most of the people who go through Central Asia come from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and China.

Migrations due to job seeking have also developed these last few years. This is largely illegal and uncontrolled despite the fact that the states declare their will to manage these movements particularly through laws on external migration. The funds transferred by migrants (outside the banking circuits) who come from the Central Asian republics are economically important but the migrants are a loss of labor for these countries.

Kazakhstan has become an attraction, as well as a passage to Russia and Europe. Economic factors are the main reasons for migration to Kazakhstan from the other countries: high unemployment (the official figures are always an underestimate), poverty, economic and also political crises. There are also many reasons that draw people to Kazakhstan: the economy has greatly benefited from the increase in oil prices, the labor market is expanding (particularly in the building industry), the wages are attractive (the average wage in Kazakhstan is 4 to 5 times higher than in Kirghizstan or Uzbekistan) and visas are more easily given to citizens of the other republics (though not so much for those of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Furthermore, migrations to Kazakhstan are largely illegal and uncontrolled, the borders being easily crossed, technical means lacking and corruption being rife.

There are also many migrations due to environmental disasters, desertification, deforestation, soil degradation because of over-irrigation and pollution due to chemical fertilizers, earthquakes and landslides. The situation is particularly dramatic on the edges of the Aral and Caspian seas, near the nuclear installations of Kazakhstan, in the area where nuclear waste is stocked in Kirghizstan (Mailu-Suu), in the south of Kirghizstan and Tadjikistan where landslides occur often, in the nuclear testing area of Lop Nor (Xingjian) and in western Tibet where there is a great deal of deforestation.
At present, Chinese migrations have increased a great deal (Han and non Han, particularly Uigur) because of Beijing’s sinicization policy (or internal “colonization”) affecting the “autonomous” regions (the Uigur Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia, Tibet). This leads to dissent and the fear of the “yellow peril”, particularly in Kirghizstan.

II. National situations

Kirghizstan

Many migrants, mainly illegal, travel to Kazakhstan and Russia looking for jobs. The estimate is 300000 to 500000 migrant Kirghiz workers in Russia, i.e. 10% of the total population. They are mainly from the middle class or students with degrees (particularly teachers) who work on the bazaars selling clothes and textiles, and in the informal sector. Students also leave to supplement their training. Migrating to find work has become an essential part of Kirghiz economy: money remittances boost the national economy; the migrants set up small shops when they come home; investments are created and returning citizens make use of the competence they acquired abroad, etc. However, tougher legislation governing migration and xenophobic movements in Russia are making things more and more difficult for migrants (even though the situation is not as bad for Kirghiz than for other peoples, as from the Caucasus).

In May 2005, after rounding up the Andijan population on the central square, the governmental forces shot part of the people, accusing them of having supported a group of Islamic extremists. Unofficial estimates are that almost 1000 people were killed, including women, children and older citizens. After the Andijan massacre, many Uzbek refugees came to the south of Kirghizstan. This led to a political crisis with Uzbekistan and had serious economic repercussions, such as the increase in oil prices.

Every time there is a political upheaval, “ethic” Russians go to Russia. The situation became more stable in the second half of the 1990s; the last mass departures took place during the March 2005 revolution when President Askar Akaev had to go into exile. Between 1990 and 2002, almost 400 000 Russians left the country. This was mainly a loss for industry, engineering and among intellectuals. Furthermore, these people helped to stabilize the economic and political situation in the country. In many cases, older members of the family stayed in Kirghizstan and received financial aid from their children who left the country.

Kirghizstan also has refugees and migrants from Tajikistan; almost 20 000 of them have left their country since 1991, most of them between 1992 and 1997 because of civil war. They are generally ethnic Kirghiz from Tajikistan who first settled in the south (Osh, Jalalabad, Batken) then moved north (Bishkek and the Chui valley). Most of them were granted refugee status but the situation is more difficult for those who arrived after 1997. They are threatened today of losing their refugee status. The High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR) has set up programs to repatriate them and is lobbying the Kirghiz and Tajik authorities to give them exceptional conditions for granting Kirghiz citizenship (mainly for the ethnic Kirghiz in Tajikistan).

There are also Afghan refugees in Kirghizstan; some have benefited from UNHCR programs for resettlement in Canada or the USA. This has led to further departures. Though they are not numerous, the Uigur refugees from China are particularly vulnerable. They are not granted asylum in Kirghizstan and are not even registered as asylum seekers. Their fate is therefore solely dependant on their network.
of relations, and contacts they are able to make through this network with the UNHCR so as to obtain an emergency program for resettlement. Finally, Kirghizstan also accepts Chechen refugees: they are not considered refugees but are registered as asylum seekers. Most of them were born or have been exiled to Kirghizstan shortly before, or right after, the fall of the USSR. They move from one country to the other according to the development of the situation in Chechnya.

Kirghizstan is also seriously affected by trafficking in human beings. Prostitution networks are numerous on the Kirghizstan borders; this prostitution may be “voluntary” or forced. Young Kirghiz women are often told they will be given a contract to work as “maids” and are actually sent to work as prostitutes, particularly in the UAE.

**Uzbekistan**

With more than 26 million inhabitants, Uzbekistan is the most populated country of the region. It is experiencing large-scale emigration of illegal workers, representing 7% of the working population, to neighbouring countries. This mostly concerns male migrants but more and more women are migrating, notably to Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan. The main destination countries are Russia, Kazakhstan (border region, Shymkent) and Kirghizstan (Fergana valley), but a small number of migrants head towards Iran, Turkey, Korea, Europe and the United States of America. The loss of skills is particularly notable in the Tashkent and Samarkand regions. Migrants are under-qualified and under-competitive on the labour market abroad and are therefore easily exploited in difficult and dangerous industries such as construction and agriculture.

Uzbekistan is not a signatory of the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Refugees from Afghanistan (notably ethnic Uzbeks) or other countries thus do not currently benefit from any legal protection. Following the Andijan massacres of May 2005, the government expelled international organisations, notably the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and foreign non-governmental organisations, such as Freedom House. These events led to the departure of some 500 Uzbeks who found refuge in Kirghizstan. Initially looked after by a UNHCR camp, virtually all of these have been evacuated to Europe and North America. Currently, many Uzbeks continue to flee Uzbekistan for Kirghizstan, Russia, Ukraine, etc and blend in with migrant workers when they can.

Uzbekistan has been particularly affected by internal displacements resulting from ecological factors, notably the desertification of the Aral Sea and soil degradation.

**Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan has become a land of immigration during recent years. Migrants, legal or otherwise, work throughout the country, in offices, fields, industrial sites, in the construction industry (Astana), mines, shops, but also supply networks of prostitution… The majority of agricultural workers are in the south of the country; these are mainly Uzbeks (more than 17 000 were recorded in 1991 and more than 24 000 in 2002), but there are also Kirghizs and Tadjiks. The majority of these immigrants are from other Central Asian republics, but some come from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Some of these are seasonal and illegal migrants; according to some estimates up to a million migrants are hired each year for seasonal work.

The national tax system encourages businesses (both small companies and big business) to hire foreigners illegally, as they form a more tractable workforce and employers can act with relative impunity, the sanctions imposed for breaches of employment legislation failing to counteract profits.
Kazakhstan is one of the preferred routes of migrants and traffickers towards Russia and Europe. The Russian-Kazakh border, which is difficult to monitor, is currently one of the largest borders in the world. Kazakhstan has a border of more than 12 000 km, of which 6 846 km is shared with Russia.

After obtaining independence, Kazakhstan developed a policy of encouraging Kazakhs scattered in other Central Asian republics, but also in China and Mongolia, to return to their historical homeland. In 2005, more than 85 000 ethnic Kazakhs (known as Oralman) returned to Kazakhstan, principally coming from Uzbekistan. Less than half of these had jobs, notably because of their lack of education. This influx of ethnic Kazakhs created tensions with the local population, some of the Oralman being implicated in criminal activity, others being accused of stealing land and “squatting” in it. The integration of these populations presents major problems, notably because the Oralman settle in places which already have a high unemployment level, but also because the authorities have little understanding of their needs and do not know how to value their qualifications. The Kazakh government, overwhelmed by its own repatriation propaganda, is now attempting to rectify the official policy, paraphrasing J.-F. Kennedy: the issue is “not what the country can give to Oralman, but what Oralman can bring to their historical homeland”.

gained from employing foreigners.