

## Karakalpaks

### Profile

The Karakalpaks' language belongs to the Kipchak family of Turkic languages, and they are closely related linguistically and culturally to the Kazakhs. They are mainly Sunni Muslims and about half a million of them live on the southern shore of the Aral Sea in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan (Government of Karakalpakstan, 2006). There are also Karakalpak villages in the Ferghana Valley.

### Historical context

The Karakalpaks appear to be one of the Turkic ethnic groups which emerged after the Mongolian invasion of the 13th Century. Their small size throughout their history made them vulnerable to the domination of other ethnic groups, and this has been the case in the 17th and 18th centuries with the Kalmyks, followed by the Kazakhs, Turkmen and Uzbeks up until the 20th century. They entered into the Russian sphere of control after 1873. An autonomous oblast was created for them in 1925 when the lands of Karakalpak was separated from the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and Khoresm People's Soviet Republic. The oblast became in 1932 the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and it was joined to the Uzbek SSR in 1936. It is because of that transfer that Karakalpaks entered into the sphere of Uzbekistan at the latter's independence in 1991, instead of their more closely related Kazakhs.

In 1993 the Supreme Soviet of the autonomous republic of Karakalpakia approved a new constitution, according to which it was transformed into a sovereign parliamentary republic renamed Karakalpakstan, within the Uzbekistan state. Constitutionally, Karakalpakstan can function apart from the national Uzbek Government, as long as it complies with Uzbekistan laws. In practice, the autonomy appears to be more nominal than real in most areas.

More nationalistic Karakalpaks demanded that the republic be given full independence, but such demands have been restrained by the fact that Uzbeks control the flow of water to Karakalpakstan. The local population has been gravely affected by the Aral Sea disaster, which has resulted in the contamination of water, soil and air and the loss of 2 million hectares of land for farming. It has been predicted that by 2015 the sea may disappear.

The Aral crisis has brought about unemployment, a deterioration of public health, and emigration from the region. About half the residents of the city of Muinak have emigrated. The economy of the city was based on fishing and navigation, but the sea has retreated more than 120 kilometres from the port, and ship repairing and fish canning have been phased out. While the North Aral Sea's water levels and condition have improved in 2005-2006 through a series of steps taken by the Kazakh government, that of the South Aral Sea of more relevance for Karapalkaks has not changed in any highly noticeable way.

This environmental and economic disaster has led to a huge outflow of Karakalpaks out of their

traditional lands in Karapalkak to other parts of Uzbekistan, but mainly to Kazakhstan. One consequence of this emigration has been that the Karapalkaks proportion of the population in its autonomous republic has been steadily diminishing in recent years: by some estimates, a sixth of the autonomous republic's population migrated to Kazakhstan from 1995-2002. The Karapalkaks probably represented in 2005 about 32.7% of the republic's population, with the Uzbeks surpassing that percentage at 36.1% (Government of Karakalpakstan, 2006).

## **Current issues**

Karakalpaks remain one of the most threatened minorities in the country because of the ecological catastrophe. Their position will not improve without significant external intervention to tackle the problems of the southern Aral Sea. In addition, it appears that as their demographic weight diminishes in the autonomous republic, so does their control over the institutions of the republic's autonomous government. While Karakalpak and Uzbek are both official languages in the autonomous republic, the government of Uzbekistan has recently been replacing the Karakalpak names of populated places, geographical features, and administrative divisions with Uzbek language names only. In addition, while there does not obviously seem to be any state-sponsored policies of transmigration to bring in Uzbeks to further dilute the presence of Karakalpaks, there has been a noticeable in-flow of Uzbeks into the agricultural lands of the republic's south in recent years.