

Meskhetian Turks

Profile

Most Meskhetian Turks are Sunni Muslims who speak an East Anatolian variety of Turkish. Uzbekistan had one of the largest communities of Meskhetian Turks in the Soviet Union, but a pogrom which started in the Ferghana Valley in 1989 led to most of these to fleeing the country, so that it is widely believed there are less than 15,000 (European Centre for Minority Issues, 2004) of them remaining in the country, mainly in Bukhara, Navoi and Samarkand. While many are involved in agriculture, they still constitute a rather urbanised, entrepreneurial and affluent segment of society.

Historical context

The entire population group of Meskhetian Turks an estimated 90,000 to 120,000 were deported from Georgia in November 1944 as a preventive measure 'for their own safety' - the accusation of 'collaboration with the enemy' never being advanced against them. They never acquired official permission to return to their homeland. Most of them resettled in Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan.

By 1989, 208,000 Meskhetian Turks lived in the Soviet Union, the main settlements being in Uzbekistan (106,000) and Kyrgyzstan (21,000). Meskhetian Turks became victims of pogroms in the Ferghana valley in June 1989; inflamed by economic competition, unemployment and population pressure, rioting continued for two weeks, leaving at least 100 Turks dead and more than 1,000 injured. The scale of violence required the intervention of Soviet troops. It is estimated that more than 60,000 Meskhetians left in the immediate aftermath of the pogroms. Most of these initially resettled in Azerbaijan, with some in southern Russia such as in Krasnodar, as well as to neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Their native Georgia for its parts did not welcome their return, hindering their immigration by denying them residence permits and even using force against them in 1991. The official number of Meskhetian Turks repatriated to Georgia by the end of 2001 was only 644 persons, with no new arrivals by the end of 2003.

The situation of the less than 15,000 remaining Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan has been one of anxious stability. While the situation has stabilised since most members of the minority have fled the country, the remaining Meskhetian Turks tend speak Uzbek and tend to hide their ethnic background.

Current issues

The relatively few remaining Meskhetian Turks appear to have chosen to try to camouflage themselves as Uzbeks since the events of 1989 and the departure of most members of this minority. Though the situation is stable and they continue to maintain cultural centres - though without substantial assistance from authorities - the reality is that many members of this minority prefer to hide their ethnic origins and are now trying to blend in with the Uzbek majority. This would also partially give them better prospects

for employment given the various Uzbekisation policies in place. Some Meskhetian Turks wish to emigrate, but this option remains impractical for a great many of them: on the one hand Uzbek authorities have a number of requirements to discourage further outward migration, and in any event their ancestral homeland in Georgia is not greeting them with open arms. Those who have property in Uzbekistan may also find it difficult to liquidate their assets at anything close to their value in the current economy in Uzbekistan.