

## **Turkmenbashi Levels Village**

**Рыскунд**

Hundreds of families have been left homeless after their village was destroyed to improve view of new showpiece mosque.

By IWPR staff in London (RCA No. 274, 02-Apr-04)

An entire village on the outskirts of Ashgabat was recently demolished so that a new showpiece mosque is visible from the main highway out of the capital, and those left homeless by the eviction have received little or no help from the authorities.

Under current official policy, mosques are supposed to become one of the central spiritual symbols of Turkmen identity. In practice, however, their construction has had unpleasant consequences for many ordinary families.

The building programme, though, may soon be coming to an end. On March 29, President Saparmurat Niazov - who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or Father of all Turkmen - told a government meeting he was putting a stop to further mosque-building.

"I'm handing over three more mosques to you, and then we won't build any more. That's enough," he said, addressing members of the state council for religious affairs present at the meeting.

However, the damage has already been done in many areas. In December 2003, more than 500 owners of houses in the village of Yalka received official notice that their houses would be demolished and were given 24 hours to leave. The demolition began soon after.

The orders, little more than tattered scraps of paper, were signed by the court of the local peasants' cooperative. When the bewildered homeowners approached the authorities for an explanation, they were told, without any evidence, that their houses had been built illegally and so had to be destroyed.

Mered-aga, a 58-year-old resident, told IWPR, "They brought me this piece of paper on December 26 last year. Rumours that the village was going to be demolished had already been circulating for a month, but it was difficult to believe that my family was soon going to be left without a roof over its head. It took me four years to build that house, and my family of eight lived there, including my grandsons. Now I simply don't have the means to buy another one."

When asked about the reason for the decision, he answered, "The local administration simply said that our village did not fit into the 'architectural ensemble' that should surround the mosque that they are building in Kipchak. Apparently, the settlement blocks the view of the mosque from the main highway out of Ashgabat."

In August 2001, Turkmenbashi ordered the construction of the mosque in his home village, Kipshak, just outside the capital.

Building work began on October 6 the same year, on a day of remembrance for victims of the 1948 Ashgabat earthquake, in which the president's mother and two brothers were killed. The mosque is scheduled to open on the same day in 2004, and will be the largest in the region with space to accommodate 20,000 worshippers. The cost of the project is estimated to be 100 million US dollars.

The decision to demolish the village was taken after Turkmenbashi, travelling on the main road out of the capital, commented that the mosque was obscured by Yalka and made it clear that he wanted the new building to dominate the horizon. A new park, named in honour of the president's mother, Kurban-Soltan Edzhe, will be laid out on the site of the village.

Annamurad, another former resident of the village, complained that they had not been given enough time to leave, "Both I and my family of five had to go and live with my parents. I haven't even bothered to complain - it's pointless. It's all about the president's home village. They put me somewhere else but I am the only one in my family with a job. It would have been easier if the government had given us time to collect our possessions and strip our houses of building materials we could reuse."

One of the village's administrators, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR, "We all understand the absurdity of the situation and I am deeply sorry for these people who have suddenly been deprived of their homes, but we have

to follow the wishes of those on high. Even allowing people a little time to strip their homes of building materials is a huge risk for us – officials in Ashgabat are constantly complaining about the time it is taking to clear the area and are threatening to sack everyone.”

The tragedy of the situation is made clear by case of Dursun Daiza. “My husband died a few years ago, leaving me a house in Yalka, where I lived with our four children,” she told IWPR. “After the demolition of the village, the state allocated us a single room at the former prison in Bizmeina, which is 15 minutes from Yalka. How it would be possible to live if we had to move further away, I don’t know.”

One of the older residents of the village seems resigned to their fate, “That’s what we Turkmen are like. We just shed a few tears and left. It’s a shame that there weren’t a few Chechen families living in Yalka, as they would have stood up for themselves, and the government could have been persuaded to change its mind.”

Another official, again speaking on condition of anonymity, also sees the difficulty of the situation. “It is not acceptable for 2,500 people to be left destitute without any official explanation,” he said. “Everyone understands that. They also understand that the current actions of our government, which I also serve, sew the seeds of extremism. If our people were not so patient, this would not be able to continue indefinitely.”

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