

**YOUTH IN CENTRAL ASIA:
LOSING THE NEW GENERATION**

31 October 2003



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YOUTH IN CENTRAL ASIA: LOSING THE NEW GENERATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More international involvement is needed in all spheres of youth activity in Central Asia, where around half the population is under 30. In a world where many people expect progress with each generation, most of the young in this region are worse off than their parents. They have higher rates of illiteracy, unemployment, poor health, and drug use and are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence. Few regions have seen such sharp declines in the welfare of their youth, and the combination of declining living standards with a demographic bulge brings increased risks of political instability and conflict. Current trends must be reversed if the region is to avoid more serious economic and political problems.

Central Asian states inherited widespread literacy and relatively high educational standards from the USSR. But education systems are in serious financial crisis. Teachers are underpaid, and their social status has plummeted. Few schools are maintained, and many lack basic facilities. Corruption has devalued qualifications, and economic pressures mean that families are better off allowing children to work than attend school. In some areas of Tajikistan, secondary school attendance has dropped from nearly 100 per cent to below 50 per cent. Young girls are increasingly likely to receive little education.

Most young people with limited schooling end up in casual labour or subsistence agriculture. Work is hard to find even for the educated, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have stifled entrepreneurial development. Parents are left supporting their children well into their twenties. Youth organisations are run by remote elder officials, and most leisure and sports facilities are either closed or affordable only to a privileged few.

It is not surprising that young people increasingly seek solutions outside mainstream society through alternative options of religion, violence, extremism or migration.

Religion serves both as an escape from everyday problems and a channel through which to criticise the present system. Radical Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have been successful in recruiting the disillusioned, providing simplistic answers to questions about the grim reality of their lives. Equal numbers have moved away from Islam to new Christian churches that offer a Western-oriented alternative.

Crime, whether in the forms of drug abuse, prostitution or gang membership, is affecting the health and life expectancy of young people. The number injecting drugs has been growing rapidly, accompanied by a sharp rise in HIV infection. Governments have been slow to react, and often do not fully acknowledge the risks.

Two thirds of young people say they want to leave the region, and a growing number do migrate, mostly to Russia or Kazakhstan. While this provides an immediate solution to frustrations, it is not without problems. Illegal migrants are easy targets for human trafficking, forced drug-smuggling and prostitution, deadly work accidents, racist harassment, extortion and kidnapping.

Responding to the demands of young people means giving them a say in how things are run and understanding that they will challenge the present generation of leaders. But most Central Asian governments regard young people as a group to be controlled rather than included. Their views are neglected in decisions on education, employment

and crime. The most extreme response has come in Turkmenistan, where the government has introduced an education system designed to produce a generation of automatons who know nothing but state propaganda. Ideology also dominates education in Uzbekistan, and critical thinking is discouraged.

Quality bilingual education is essential to promote integration of ethnic minorities and access to political and economic power. Greater efforts to reduce obstacles to business development and the economic exploitation of young people are needed, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Efforts by Central Asian governments to eradicate religious extremism through heavy-handed security policies have failed, and there is a danger that state restrictions on religious expression will only increase the attractiveness of underground and fringe movements. Governments should adopt a policy of greater openness by allowing wider and better Islamic education and should also improve knowledge of Islam among religious and government officials.

Governments must recognise the extent of drug consumption and allow an open discussion on the issue, include parents in the debate and promote needle exchange and methadone use. Likewise, the HIV/AIDS pandemic must be publicly acknowledged, and education prioritised.

Given the contribution migrants make to the GDP of most Central Asian states, it would be only fair that governments enhance their protection through risk awareness campaigns and provide better support in Kazakhstan and Russia via diplomatic representations and cooperation with NGOs.

Donors have too often been happy to propose quick fixes such as school reconstruction and new computers without the necessary follow-up and conditioning of aid to changes in teaching standards, real access to decision-making for youth, a greater will to fight discrimination and introduction of open discourse on religion. Considerable financial and political commitments are needed to improve the situation of young people, but the pay-off in future stability would be in the interests not just of Central Asia, but of the international community as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the governments of Central Asia:

Education

1. Aim to raise education spending to pre-independence levels of 5-6 per cent of GDP.
2. Improve basic school infrastructures, such as buildings, heating, and power, particularly in rural areas.
3. Make retraining of teachers a higher priority, including new teaching methodologies such as bilingual education.
4. Increase teaching resources available to schools, such as improved classroom materials and textbooks, and real access to computers.
5. Encourage critical thinking in students by improving the quality of teaching, textbooks and methodologies, including the use of classroom interaction instead of rote learning.
6. Tackle corruption by enforcing greater transparency in examinations through national examination systems outside the control of individual teachers.
7. Balance the rising financial strain on parents with increased involvement in school management by parent groups.

Social Integration

8. Allow the formation of youth-based organisations free of state control and with real access to decision-making.
9. Allow and encourage the formation of youth-oriented electronic and print media dealing with issues from the viewpoint of young people.

Economic prospects

10. Develop training opportunities and strong economic incentives for young entrepreneurs and ease restrictions on registration of businesses and access to financing.
11. Encourage links between higher education and the job market, including work experience programs and incentives for companies to hire students.

To donors:

12. Provide greater resources for improved school infrastructure (with tighter control over expenditure).
13. Provide greater resources for improved teacher retraining, particularly in new methodologies that are designed to boost critical thinking and involve more open methods of interacting with students.
14. Provide greater resources for teaching, including textbooks, classroom materials, and equipment, and link provision of computers and other equipment with follow-up and training.
15. Increase programs designed to boost school attendance in poor, rural areas, including school food programs, and design incentives for female students to complete schooling.
16. Minimise risk of a complete collapse in higher education for young Turkmens by establishing special study abroad educational programs for them, including those who have already left the country.
17. Provide greater resources for sports and leisure facilities for youth, focusing on local, low-cost initiatives, and support efforts to establish young groups, youth clubs and youth NGOs.

Osh/Brussels, 31 October 2003

YOUTH IN CENTRAL ASIA: LOSING THE NEW GENERATION

I. INTRODUCTION

Between 1950 and 1990 the population of Central Asia almost tripled, from 17.2 million people to 50.5 million.¹ Having many children was always considered a sign of prosperity and pride for a family. In the Soviet period large families were encouraged by a generous social system of allowances subsidised by Moscow. But high birth rates have created a large youth population in Central Asia that faces an uncertain future.

Twelve years after Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan became independent, fertility rates have dropped, many people have migrated out of the region and the total population remains at around 50 million. But among those, sixteen million – almost every third Central Asian – is aged between fifteen and 29,² and half the population is under 30. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, youth (those aged fifteen to 29) represent around 25 per cent of the population, a figure predicted to remain stable for twenty years.³ In Tajikistan, the youth population is well over 30 per cent and will almost double by 2025, to three million. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, youth also account for over 30 per cent of the population but are predicted to fall to 25 per cent by 2025, with a small absolute growth in numbers.⁴

Although there is some differentiation among countries, Central Asia as a whole has an

overwhelmingly young population. Yet, young people are absent from many areas of social and political life. They were seen in the Soviet system as an undifferentiated and a generally unthinking mass that required close supervision. Now they are barely thought of at all by policy-makers.

Behind this stereotyped image of youth lies diversity and numerous specific challenges. In the past decade, Central Asia has undergone severe economic and political changes that have had serious social consequences. Young Central Asians are in a position of clear disadvantage in many aspects of life compared to what their parents faced. Under the Soviets until 1991, young people enjoyed a near-100 per cent literacy rate, easy access to education, full employment, and a reliable and free medical system. Today, most of this has been lost: young people are increasingly poorly educated, drop out of schools en masse, and find it difficult to get work. Their health is seriously threatened by drug abuse, AIDS and other health risks. While the average life expectancy at birth was 75 before 1991 in Central Asia, it is now between 60 and 64.⁵

Studies suggest that a so-called ‘youth bulge’ – a high proportion of youth in comparison to the total population – represents a serious potential source of conflict, particularly in countries facing economic problems. As noted by researcher Henrik Urdal, “if young people are left with no alternative but unemployment and poverty, they are likely to join a rebellion as an alternative way of generating an income”.⁶ Having little or nothing to lose, young

¹ Figures from U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbsum.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Henrik Urdal, “The Devil in the Demographics: The effect of youth bulges on domestic armed conflict, 1950-2000”, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo.

people are more likely to join underground and illegal movements calling for radical changes.

In Central Asia, this potential for radicalisation of youth is already visible in the case of the Islamist radical group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has recruited heavily among the disillusioned. A similar age group formed the rank-and-file for the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a Taliban-allied movement in exile in Afghanistan.⁷

The numbers of young people who actually get involved in radical Islam or other potentially destabilising groups is very small. But behind those who actually join up is a much larger disaffected group that sees little hope in the future, except through migration. Many analysts of the post-Soviet landscape suggested that positive change would appear as more young people came through the system. The problems faced by young people suggest this may be erroneous: instead of a new generation with new ideas coming to power, the best and the brightest are leaving, with those left behind worse educated and less equipped to handle a complex world than were their parents.

II. OBSTACLES FOR YOUTH

A. EDUCATION

Until 1991 Moscow-controlled Central Asia maintained an education system that was free and accessible almost to all. The Soviet state economy provided employment for all citizens, and graduates were automatically offered the best positions. This network of education and socialisation was well funded as Moscow attempted to educate and control youth to ensure ideological loyalty.

When they gained independence in 1991, the new Central Asian states immediately faced huge problems in financing this state system of universal education. While budgets shrank, governments attempted to reassess curricula, introduce more local language teaching, and rewrite history and other textbooks to reflect new political realities. This has been an enormous challenge, but governments have not addressed the main problems causing today's failure: rampant corruption, growing inequality, and the inability of the new systems to offer employment prospects. Those issues explain why so many young Central Asians are dissatisfied with their educational system.

1. Funding

The Central Asian governments have made repeated claims of commitment to maintaining the Soviet level of free education, but in reality the lack of central subsidies and shifting budget priorities have ensured that funding has become insufficient. Even though the youth population is increasing, the education budget has fallen in most Central Asian states: in Kazakhstan it declined from 6 per cent of GDP in 1989 to only 3 per cent in 2000; and in Kyrgyzstan 3.7 per cent.⁸ In Tajikistan only 2 per cent of GDP goes to education.⁹ Such levels of spending are much lower than in developing countries that use education as part of the drive for economic growth.¹⁰

⁷ See ICG Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003.

⁸ Jeremy Branston, "As World Marks Literacy Day, What of USSR's Legacy?", RFE/RL, 4 September 2003.

⁹ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Selected Issues and Statistics", January 2003, p. 79.

¹⁰ By comparison, Estonia's education spending amounted to 7.5 per cent of GDP in 1998-2000 while Thailand spent 5.4

Direct effects of reduced budgets are the economic hardship and consequent loss of social status that teachers now endure. They are underpaid and are abandoning schools in search of better jobs. Men are among the first to quit, as future teachers in Nukus, Uzbekistan, explained: "Men don't choose a teacher's profession because they know they will not be able to feed their families and will feel ashamed because they won't be considered real men".¹¹ This was repeated across the region. Women dominate educational staff at school level,¹² because their job is often perceived as an extension of their mother's duty, not a real career. As ICG was told: "women take care of children, so they can easily return to school between pregnancies".¹³

The scarcity of available teachers means most classrooms are overcrowded. As one Tajik teacher put it: "My class lasts 45 minutes, and I have 40 students, that is about a minute per child; how can I teach them a foreign language?"¹⁴ Most teachers rely on old methods of learning by rote and have little time to attend to the needs of individual students. As a specialist explains, teachers easily label some children as "problematic", and they truly become that because they feel no one is listening to them.¹⁵ Except for a few elite or private institutions, schools often turn into virtually extended kindergartens where children are kept in a relatively safe environment, away from the dangers of the street but given only a very basic knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Low budgets affect not only the quality and quantity of teachers, but working conditions as well. Funds for building maintenance, electricity and telephone bills are insufficient, causing extensive cuts in heating and use of phone, fax and internet. Access to modern equipment is equally scarce, as Bukhara (Uzbekistan) students complained: "We have no computers, except for old Bulgarian models from the 1980s, and no connection to the internet at all. When

we have an IT class, it is strictly theoretical, never on the computer".¹⁶

In some remote areas, no education is offered because schools are physically disappearing. In Tajikistan the 1992-1997 civil war had a disastrous impact on infrastructure; many schools served as shelters for refugees or fighters and were bombed or partially destroyed. Today not all have been rebuilt, and many still lack basic equipment such as covered floors, windows, tables, chairs, heating and electricity, toilets and water. In rural Turkmenistan, many schools have closed because no maintenance has been conducted since 1991. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, urban schools often offer decent conditions, yet those in many remote villages lack windows, heating, furniture or even floors. In Uzbekistan two thirds of rural schools and half of urban schools do not have functioning toilets.¹⁷

Lack of state funding for education generally means parents have to take over the role of the state. This explains the paradox of the school system: on the one hand, education is declared officially free to maintain the illusion of continuity with high Soviet standards. In reality, parents are requested to contribute to the budget: money collection is organised unofficially by school directors or teachers, usually on a monthly basis,¹⁸ and parents are strongly encouraged to give 'presents' to teachers. The lack of basic funding is so acute that in certain schools children directly contribute to teachers' salaries: "Computers have been distributed for free but teachers use them for computer games such as Counterstrike and make pupils pay two somoni (U.S.\$0.8) to play the game at school during computer classes".¹⁹

Governments are now introducing and developing a payment concept for higher education. On average one year costs U.S.\$200 in small and provincial cities, and from U.S.\$500 to U.S.\$1,000 and more on prestigious campuses, usually in capitals. For example, to study law in Tashkent costs about

per cent. See the UNDP's human development indicators at www.undp.org.

¹¹ ICG interview with Nukus Pedagogical Institute students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹² In Uzbekistan, women constitute 83 per cent of primary teachers and 64 per cent of secondary school teachers. See UNDP Uzbekistan at <http://www.undp.uz/sections/files/51/CCA-UZB.PDF>.

¹³ ICG interview in Namangan, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁴ ICG interview with Tajik teacher, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁵ ICG interview with NGO leader, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁶ ICG interview with Bukhara students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁷ UNESCO-UNICEF, "Monitoring Learning Achievements: Uzbekistan 1999".

¹⁸ Weekly contributions vary from U.S.\$1 to U.S.\$5, depending on the economic situation of families. Central Asian families in rural areas often have two to five children, with a monthly income below U.S.\$20 in most areas. Poor families can be freed from collection, but their children will get less attention from teachers.

¹⁹ ICG interview with Dushanbe youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

U.S.\$800 a year. Tuition for a year of journalism classes in Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, is U.S.\$100. After a controversial campaign, a referendum in Tajikistan in June 2003 changed the constitution to permit tuition-based higher education; yearly fares are about U.S.\$200 for average universities. Although low by international standards, such fees represent a heavy burden for low and middle-income families.

These formal fees represent only part of the financial burden for students, however. The former Soviet system of free dormitories no longer exists as buildings have been privatised or let. Access to dormitories is therefore extremely limited and becomes part of the corruption system: bribes must be paid to be enrolled, and many students sublet to increase their revenues: "In my dorm room, there are four beds, but there are eight of us sleeping in turns. We bribe the dorm night guard and he lets us in, ignoring the overcrowding".²⁰ Some students manage to move in with relatives living in cities, but the majority has to rent rooms or flats.

There are exceptions to this general financial hardship. The American University in Bishkek, for example, offers scholarships to gifted students, including housing and other perks. But most students still face serious financial problems if they wish to gain a higher degree.

Textbooks and learning materials are also a growing expense in a student's budget. Most Central Asian states have replaced Russian with their native language and encourage education in a non-Russian speaking environment.²¹ But since there are very few new textbooks,²² most teachers and professors have no alternative but to use the old Soviet ones. In Turkmenistan, the old Soviet textbooks of science have been translated into Latinised Turkmen, a picture of Turkmenbashi has been introduced on the first page, the names of the authors have been

changed, but in fact the 'new' textbook is an exact replica of the old Soviet original.²³

The only alternative for students is to use new textbooks printed in Russian and imported from Russia, or in some cases in English. While some libraries provide necessary books, most students buy textbooks at stands around campuses or in bookstores. The business of importing textbooks is so lucrative that some do not hesitate to manipulate international aid, as in Tajikistan: "The few textbooks sent by Russia as humanitarian aid with the label: not for sale – can be purchased in bookstores or at the bazaar".²⁴ The prices at such free markets are often prohibitive. A student in Kyrgyzstan explained: "I study computers, and we have no textbook in our class. So I have to buy a textbook in the market at 800 soms, or U.S.\$20, which represents more than my father's monthly salary".²⁵

The financial burden is so high that it makes schooling unaffordable for parts of the population. In rural areas, children need shoes for long daily marches to the nearest school, as well as stationary and textbooks. In poor urban areas – usually on the outskirts of towns in apartment blocks where unemployment is rife and living conditions are tough, young people also drop out of school. Parents are unable to spend money on education and thus encourage children to contribute to the family budget by finding jobs on the street from a very early age. It is not unusual for children over seven or eight years to bring U.S.\$1 home every day to their parents.²⁶ Children earn money by begging, pick-pocketing, or doing manual work such as washing or guarding cars, selling cigarettes or food on the street, or pulling trolleys at the bazaar.

For those who manage to afford education, tuition, accommodation, food, transportation and learning material fees, there is still another major source of expense: the market of examinations and marking, an area of widespread and systematic corruption.

2. Corruption

That education must be paid for is being gradually accepted by Central Asian societies, but the negative

²⁰ ICG interview with Bishkek students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

²¹ Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have given Russian a status of official language, next to the state languages of Kyrgyz and Kazakh respectively. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have stripped Russian of any official status.

²² This is partly because of changing alphabets and mostly because of lack of funds allocated to textbook printing. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have officially abandoned the Cyrillic alphabet and replaced it with a Latin alphabet.

²³ ICG interview in Turkmenistan, May 2003.

²⁴ ICG interview with Dushanbe youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

²⁵ ICG interview with Tokmok student, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

²⁶ ICG interview with NGO leader, Tajikistan, April 2003.

side-effect is that for many students as well as teachers, the line between paying for education and corruption has become blurred.

Despite deregulation, the five Central Asian states have kept the former Soviet system of entry examinations to higher education. Every year, graduates from secondary school prepare themselves for tests that will decide whether they are allowed to study at university. Tests are oral and written, include multi-choice questions as well as essays, and officially guarantee equal chances.

But access to prestigious universities can be unofficially bought or facilitated. As one Uzbek student explained: “you can bypass entry tests by paying examination guards, and giving your passport to another person who will actually take the test instead of you”.²⁷ Sometimes money is simply given to examination staff and professors. Bribes vary depending on the level of the university and the branch chosen, but are reputedly as much as U.S.\$10,000 in some of the most prestigious universities in Tashkent, for example.

The entry examination is just the first level of the corruption system. Annual marks, as well as examinations for entrance to higher grades represent the next step. A Bishkek student explained his role in the system:

People know that I am in charge of bribes. I go up to students of my group, collect money from them, generally U.S.\$5 to U.S.\$10 per subject, take my own commission and then safely deliver the remaining money in an envelop to the professor, indicating who paid how much for what mark. Sometimes the teachers complain it is not enough, so I have to bargain again with the students. Everybody knows the system and most use it.²⁸

Students quickly get the message that they need to pay to get the best marks, regardless of their efforts to study. Very soon, claimed one student in Nukus, most students stop studying because they realise they can buy grades; and some teachers even openly

blackmail students for bribes.²⁹ The same method applies to graduation examinations, to the delivery of diplomas and to the ‘red diplomas’ that are awarded to outstanding students who have the best marks in all subjects and are perceived as opening more employment doors.

Grades and examinations are not the only source of income for underpaid and cash-hungry educational staff. With average monthly salaries for teachers and professors of U.S.\$5 to U.S.\$10 in schools, and U.S.\$20 to U.S.\$50 in most universities, creative approaches are used to tap into the pockets of students. In one university in Uzbekistan, a student claimed that “the rector forced all the students to buy tickets for a concert – he made two million sums [approximately U.S.\$2,000] in a couple of days. If you don’t buy the ticket, you don’t get your monthly grant – that’s it”.³⁰

Corruption is also disguised as private tutoring, a relatively recent but extremely popular phenomenon. Very marginal during the Soviet period, it now flourishes throughout Central Asia, from primary school to university. In the context of overcrowded classes and underpaid staff, proper schooling is often available only outside school in the form of private tutoring. Parents consider it more useful to pay teachers and professors to prepare their children, expecting in return to have guaranteed access for them to higher education, instead of giving large envelopes of money at entry or examination time. Similarly, students are strongly encouraged by their own professors to take ‘additional’ classes in the form of private tutoring, to make sure they pass exams successfully. The most popular private classes are Russian and foreign languages, mathematics, literature and science, at prices varying from U.S.\$ 0.7 to U.S.\$20 per hour. While some teachers earnestly teach and try their best to improve the education of their pupils, others simply take it as a disguised bribe.

Overall, fighting corruption in the educational system is extremely difficult because there is no political will from the top. As one Uzbek student described, “corruption has now become a system and not to participate makes you an outsider and a danger to the

²⁷ ICG interview with Nukus student, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

²⁸ ICG interview with student, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003. For Uzbekistan, see Anton Sinyshv, “Pay up or fail, Uzbek students told”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 27 May 2003.

²⁹ ICG interview with Nukus student, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

³⁰ ICG interview with Nukus student, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

system so we have to give in and eventually take bribes".³¹

Attempts to tackle the problem have been limited but have shown some success. In Kyrgyzstan the Ministry of Education, with U.S. assistance, has introduced a National Merit Scholarship Test, which in theory ensures fair allocation of scholarships purely on the basis of the examination. It is a worthwhile attempt to distance selection from government officials, and could be usefully spread to other Central Asian states. Computerisation of entry and examination systems can also limit favouritism and bribery. A level of transparency has been achieved in certain foreign universities in Central Asia, such as the Turkish Manas University in Kyrgyzstan, where entry examinations are computerised and sent to Turkey for marking, and the American University in Central Asia, also based in Kyrgyzstan.

Raising the salaries of educational staff to decent levels and not delaying them for months is part of the solution, but certainly not enough. Teachers need strong incentives to be persuaded to work in difficult areas. Tajikistan has implemented an effective – but very limited – program of giving land to teachers who agree to go to villages, an example that could be extended to other countries.

But a policy of transparency and accountability should also be implemented to encourage genuine teaching and study instead of the practice by which students merely appear at exam time. Governments should admit that if they are unable to finance school education fully, the current unofficial collection of money should be made more transparent, and schools should be made more accountable to parents. Since parents are already paying for education, they should be given a say in its management and the quality of teaching.

3. Access

Compared to other developing countries with similar economic levels, Central Asian states have remarkably high levels of school attendance and literacy. What is worrying, however, is the sharp decline from near-100 per cent enrolment. Pre-school education was widely accessible in the Soviet period, but has now shrunk to just 14 per cent in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, there has been a

dramatic decline in pre-primary school enrolment of about 40 per cent from the 1989 level.³² Enrolment in primary schools – in the high 90s during the late Soviet period – has dropped to 84 per cent in Tajikistan, 88 per cent in Uzbekistan, and 89 per cent in Kyrgyzstan.³³ But enrolment figures hide widespread non-attendance, particularly after the early years, and especially for young girls.

In Tajikistan, the national average enrolment rate was only 61.1 per cent in 2001,³⁴ compared to nearly 100 per cent before 1991. Many students enrol but fail to show up during most of the school year. Measuring attendance is difficult, but in one area as many as 45 per cent of children did not go to school regularly.³⁵ Experts suggest that there has been a large, albeit unrecorded, surge in illiteracy.³⁶

The situation with higher education is more varied. In Kyrgyzstan there has been an expansion of the system, and enrolment has more than doubled, although it will take time for uniform standards to be introduced. By contrast, Uzbekistan maintains strict control over access to higher education, and in the past decade enrolment has dropped sharply. Whereas in most transition countries, higher education has gone up sharply – more than doubling in Hungary for example – in Uzbekistan enrolments have slumped from 14 per cent of the relevant age group in 1991/92 to only about 6.4 per cent in 2000/01. Although there seems to be some reversal in the past two years, the trend is worrying.³⁷

The situation is even worse in Turkmenistan, where the state has deliberately curtailed education. The government has significantly reduced the number of higher education institutions and concentrated them in the capital, Ashgabat. The total number of students has been reduced to less than 4,000 a year from 30,000 before 1991. Recent measures have made it even more difficult to gain access to higher

³¹ ICG interview with Bukhara students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

³² See UNDP Uzbekistan report at <http://www.undp.uz/sections/files/51/CCA-UZB.PDF>. For comparison, in Central Europe the figure is 75 per cent, Branston, "USSR's Legacy", *op. cit.*

³³ Branston, "USSR's Legacy", *op. cit.*

³⁴ UNDP, "Tajikistan: Human Development Report 2001 – 2002: Information and Communications Technology for Development", Dushanbe, March 2003, p. 86.

³⁵ ICG interview, CARE, Dushanbe, February 2003.

³⁶ ICG interview, Yukie Mokuo, Head of Office, UNICEF, Dushanbe, 12 December 2002.

³⁷ World Bank, "Uzbekistan Living Standards Assessment", vol. II, May 2003, p. 93.

education: would-be students must now work for two years before applying to university, because of an alleged lack of 'honest people' in the workforce.³⁸ As a result, many Turkmen students have applied to study abroad, primarily in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but a recent decree provides that their diplomas will not be recognised if governmental channels were not used for study – the case of the majority.³⁹ Economic restrictions are also affecting Turkmen students abroad.⁴⁰

Rural/urban divide

Attendance is lowest in rural areas, where the Soviet subsidised system of education has suffered the most. The first to leave villages are the teachers, whose prospects for alternative income in villages, such as private tutoring or second jobs, are very low. Most migrate to larger cities, as in one border region of Kyrgyzstan where teachers have abandoned their jobs for better prospects over the frontier: "In our small town, most school teachers simply cross the border – it is five kilometres from here – and teach in Kazakhstan where they have salaries three to five times higher".⁴¹

Efforts by the state to maintain teachers in villages are unsuccessful because they do not compensate for the lack of economic opportunities. In Kyrgyzstan, most state-sponsored students from pedagogical universities, who are supposed to teach in a rural area for two years to obtain a validated diploma, prefer to pay bribes and avoid the obligation because they have little inclination to endure village conditions and work in poorly maintained school buildings.⁴²

Left with fewer and less qualified teachers, rural parents see little benefit in education and believe it makes more sense to keep children busy at home,

where they can be fed, and taught life skills,⁴³ such as sewing, working in the fields and taking care of cattle. So at best, rural children are sent irregularly to school, in periods of low activity, such as the cold months.

It is not just the lack of economic prospects that keep children away, but also the worsening conditions such as lack of heating. International funding for reconstruction or construction of new schools has often been marred by corruption and mismanagement. In Tajikistan, a World Bank project aimed at rebuilding schools has not been effective, with corruption playing a major part.⁴⁴

A much more effective approach has been implemented by a USAID project: the Community Action Investment Program (CAIP) requests the most impoverished communities in the Ferghana Valley to set priorities and provide initial funding by themselves, and only then brings donor money in to complete the project. In this program the community carries out the construction work itself and is in full charge of maintenance, which makes the project more sustainable.⁴⁵

Gender and cultural barriers

When Soviet rule was introduced in predominantly Muslim Central Asia, a long campaign was necessary to bring women out of their homes so they could study and work. While full gender equality was never achieved, Central Asian women gained visibility in Soviet society and considered the right to education and full employment as the norm, at least in urban areas.

Once economic collapse hit the region in the mid-1990s, women were the first victims of widespread unemployment. They were encouraged to stay home because many men found it difficult to accept a competing economic partner at home at a time when their own jobs were threatened. A more conservative view of the role of women has been revived, prioritising marriage above education and work. As a young Tajik female student explained:

³⁸ See RFE/RL, news brief from and about Turkmenistan, 8 July 2003.

³⁹ For example, over 200 Turkmen students study law and medicine at Osh University in southern Kyrgyzstan but are now facing the dilemma of whether to return home to possible harassment or stay away with no job prospects.

⁴⁰ In February 2003, Turkmen authorities banned unlimited foreign exchange for students who need to pay their fees in foreign currency abroad. See Arslan Atamanov, "Students hit by latest Niazov decree", IWPR, 7 March 2003.

⁴¹ ICG interview with Tokmok youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁴² ICG interview with Bishkek students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁴³ A popular saying in Tajikistan goes: "Why go to school – they don't pay you there – but they pay you at the bazaar".

⁴⁴ See ICG Asia Report N°51, *Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development*, 24 April 2003.

⁴⁵ ICG interview with CAIP coordinators in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, March-May 2003.

Girls are now brought up in anticipation of their life event: their wedding. For them it is the only opportunity to see another house beyond their four walls. So they are happy about it, out of ignorance. Some are simply forced to marry and then it is too late because they get pregnant.⁴⁶

Such traditional views are particularly widespread in rural Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In Tajikistan, two thirds more boys complete schooling than girls.⁴⁷ In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, society has a better understanding of the economic power of education and encourages girls to finish school and enter university.

Wedding traditions are a major hindrance to the education of women. Parents refuse to invest time and money in the education of daughters because they know they will leave the family after marriage⁴⁸ and will not be there to support them in old age, unlike sons who have the duty to look after their parents.⁴⁹ Even when more liberal parents allow their daughters to study, the final aim often remains marriage, not career. Education is then perceived as an additional tool for a successful marriage.⁵⁰ Thus, many female students never finish their studies, as a Kyrgyz student explained: “In my journalism class, we started with 30 girls and one boy. Now in the third year, there are only thirteen girls left; all the others got married and now stay at home”.⁵¹

Prestigious majors like law and economics have few young women. For example, in Tajikistan in the 2000-2001 academic year, out of 77,701 enrolled university students, only 18,416 were women, and of over 20,500 studying economics and management – seen as the key to success – only 4,000⁵² were female. Young women determined to study and work face tremendous pressure from their families and

society: “If you don’t get married before twenty, it means you have a physical or mental problem and will never get married. So I have to argue with my mother everyday because I want to study more and get a job – and not get married now”.⁵³

Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov has imposed a quota for female students from isolated districts in Dushanbe universities, but again local corruption seems to have hindered the project.⁵⁴

Grassroots work needs to be done with parents since they still have a big say in the education of children and options for daughters. Religious leaders should also be included in a wider policy promoting and valuing education for girls. Finally, incentives should be implemented to encourage more female students in the prestigious majors such as law, economics, and international relations.

Language barriers

Language has also become a factor of discrimination. Despite efforts by all local governments to support and encourage school and university education in local languages, parents often make the choice of Russian – or even English or Turkish – for their children because they believe it results in better education.⁵⁵ They argue that Russian schools have better and newer textbooks and better trained teachers.

Most universities offer the same curriculum in two options: the native language or Russian, with the latter usually perceived as more difficult and prestigious. The exception is Turkmenistan, where higher education in Russian has been banned. Many students – including Russian-speaking ethnic Turkmens – fail to pass the Turkmen language test required for access to higher education, and students from ethnic minorities are simply excluded.⁵⁶ The estimated 400,000-strong Uzbek minority, about 10 per cent of the population, is left without Uzbek schools and textbooks.⁵⁷ Many Russian-language schools have been closed, despite tremendous

⁴⁶ ICG interview with Tajik students, Tajikistan, April 2003.

⁴⁷ UNDP, “Tajikistan: Human Development Report”, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴⁸ In Central Asia, girls leave their families to live with their husbands and in-laws.

⁴⁹ ICG interview with NGO activist, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁵⁰ The Russian acronym for Higher Education Institution – meaning university – VUZ is now being jokingly read as referring to “Vyjti Uspeshno Zamuzh” – which translates as “to get married successfully”.

⁵¹ ICG interview with Karakol students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁵² For all figures, see UNDP, “Tajikistan: Human Development Report”, op. cit., p. 61.

⁵³ ICG interview with young female student in Kokand, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁵⁴ See ICG Report N°51, *Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ See Sultan Jumagulov, “Kyrgyz language barriers”, IWPR, 19 August 2003.

⁵⁶ See Murad Novruzov, “Turkmenistan: Russian students targeted”, IWPR, 16 July 2003.

⁵⁷ See ICG Asia Report N°44, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan’s Failing Dictatorship*, 17 January 2003.

demand for them by both ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking ethnic Turkmens.⁵⁸

Following massive emigration of the Russian-speaking population out of Central Asia after 1991,⁵⁹ the use of the language has declined sharply. Children in villages or poor urban areas have at best only a limited command of Russian. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which experience large flows of migrants to Russia and where the knowledge of Russian in rural areas was low even during Soviet times, private language classes are in high demand since local schools have poor programs. A UNICEF specialist explains: "Very often Russian classes have turned into classes of Russian as a foreign language, instead of Russian-language curriculum. There are no Russian teachers left in villages".⁶⁰

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where many ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs do not speak their native Turkic languages, Russian is much more widespread, and parents in rural areas prefer their children to go to Russian schools if there is a choice and the financial possibility.

The need for education in local languages is legitimate but should be combined with Russian, which is still desired by a majority of parents and students. As one Uzbek student said: "because there is very little good literature in [the] Uzbek language, it makes children from Russian classes smarter, and better".⁶¹ The solution is to implement real bilingual education, similar to the multilingual governance project of the Swiss program Cimera in Kyrgyzstan, which allows subjects to be taught in two or three languages. According to its coordinator: "The aim is to introduce natural language acquisition...in ten kindergartens and ten primary schools in Kyrgyzstan. Russian is crucial to have access to quality education

and media information, while Kyrgyz is necessary to have access to political power".⁶²

The language issue is key because it serves as a powerful integration tool for all ethnic groups and allows ethnic tension to diminish. It also gives youth the choice of studying in Russia or under a Russian-language curriculum but leaves them able to return and work in state structures.

Child labour

Instead of helping students gain better employment opportunities, the state sometimes exploits them as unpaid labour in fields, an old Soviet habit still maintained in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Before 1991, older school and university students were sent for two months with their teachers to fields to pick crops, particularly cotton. This "education through work" provided state farms with extensive free labour.

All Central Asian countries, as signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have agreed to renounce this form of exploitation.⁶³ In practice though, only Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have effectively banned forced labour of students, while Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan turn a blind eye to the practice or actively encourage it. Tajikistan does not encourage but offers little alternative to child labour, which is part of the survival strategy for many families.⁶⁴ The situation is different in Uzbekistan, where child labour is not only common, but still encouraged by official state structures during the cotton picking season. School children are enrolled in brigades and brought by trucks to fields to pick cotton in extremely poor living conditions.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ According to officials, only nine of 70 secondary schools in Ashgabad have any Russian-language classes. Children with non-Russian surnames are reportedly not permitted to attend Russian-language classes. See Agamurad Berdyev, "Turkmenistan ousting Russian from the education system", *Times of Central Asia*, 4 September 2003, p. 1.

⁵⁹ In Kyrgyzstan, the number of ethnic Russians fell by 50 per cent between 1991 and 2001. In Turkmenistan, virtually all Russian speakers have left or are leaving the country.

⁶⁰ ICG interview with UNICEF staff, Tajikistan, April 2003.

⁶¹ ICG interview with Ferghana youth, Uzbekistan, April 2003.

⁶² ICG interview with Beatrice Schuler, Cimera project coordinator, Kyrgyzstan, June 2003. See also www.cimera.org.

⁶³ Article 32 specifies that: "States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development". For the full text of the convention, see <http://www.unicef.org/crc/fulltext.htm>.

⁶⁴ Farangis Najibullah, "Central Asia: For many young Uzbeks and Tajiks, working is a way of life", www.rferl.org, 27 May 2003.

⁶⁵ Ulugbek Khaydarov, Kamol Khalmuradov, "Uzbekistan: Cotton Quota Crisis", IWPR, 29 November 2002.

The worst situation is probably in Turkmenistan, where youth rights are systematically ignored. As one Turkmen student said: “we only study half of the year, because we spend three months planting and then picking cotton”.⁶⁶

4. Content

Even for those who attend school or university, standards are far from ideal. While a few elite institutions provide a good education, at a price, the system fails for the mass of young people to deliver the modern skills needed.

Since good textbooks are often in short supply or expensive, an extra burden falls on teachers. However, as a student in Tajikistan noted: “Education is worsening because old cadres are leaving, and replaced by young teachers who have little knowledge so they teach even less, and the level is just collapsing”.⁶⁷

Many teachers opt for the easiest route: learning by rote from old textbooks, while respect for authorities and the regime is a constant refrain in many schools.

Quality education requires the introduction of two crucial elements: interactive methodology and critical thinking. Because of a lack of financial and career encouragement, teachers are relying on old Soviet methods of learning and have no time to develop other skills for children. Child-centred education remains the exception, as children are usually taught what they need for exams, not what they need in real life. According to a survey conducted in Uzbekistan:

Interviewed teachers say they have very little motivation for their work. Even if they are willing to improve their skills, they cannot because the institutes for upgrading teachers’ qualification do not fulfil their functions and provide only old material.⁶⁸

The lack of interactive methods is acknowledged by students in the same survey: “what prevents us from enjoying school as students is the lack of interest for subjects. Teachers are not creative given the situation of our educational system”.⁶⁹

Critical thinking is the second necessary reform. Not encouraged during the Soviet period because of the imposition of political conformity, it is still perceived as a possible threat to the establishment and culturally disruptive because younger people, by tradition, are expected to listen to, not question their elders. This mind-set hinders reform in all sectors, as younger people are often afraid to speak up in the presence of bosses. As one Uzbek former teacher noted: “children learn by heart, and can quote ideas or opinions brilliantly but it is never theirs and they have no opinion of their own”.⁷⁰

Critical thinking is met with particular suspicion from many officials. The Open Society Institute (OSI) and USAID have facilitated debate clubs that give young people a forum to learn techniques of expressing opinions while also carefully listening to those of others, and to practice skills on various topics, including culturally or politically sensitive issues such as prostitution, drug use, and the death penalty. Similarly the Aga Khan Foundation has encouraged interactive and critical thinking in its seminar and school network across Central Asia. The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) has done useful work in Kyrgyzstan in developing civic education programs for schools.⁷¹

Opposition might also be encountered from some parents in more conservative communities. An NGO activist recalls from field experience in Tajikistan:

Some parents are even afraid to lose authority in rural areas. They say, if I allow my son to participate in debate clubs at the school,

⁶⁶ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, May 2003. See also IRIN-OCHA, “Turkmenistan: Focus on education”, www.irinnews.org, 9 July 2003.

⁶⁷ ICG interview with youth in Tajikistan, May 2003.

⁶⁸ See “Mneniya uchitelei, uchenikov i roditelei o sisteme obrazovaniya v Uzbekistane” [Opinions of teachers, school students and parents about the educational system in Uzbekistan], Ekspert-fikri Centre of Social Research, Tashkent, April 2002.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ ICG interview with Kokand NGO activist, Uzbekistan, April 2003.

⁷¹ IFES has piloted a civic education program with teacher guides for tenth and eleventh grade students in Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek language editions. Its materials use an interactive approach allowing teachers to have students practice participatory democracy in their classrooms. To date 225 schools have received these materials in conjunction with teacher training, and funding is being sought to extend the program to all schools in the republic. IFES also promotes student action committees in village schools and runs camps where students take part in political simulations.

tomorrow he will say ‘No’ to me, and after tomorrow, he won’t sleep at home, and will do drugs.⁷²

Critical thinking is equally lacking in higher education, as the rector of the new Uzbek-British Westminster University in Tashkent explained:

What we emphasise here is independent, critical, and creative thinking and judgment: students are given direction but not allowed to copy from books; they spend less hours in classes and more hours doing individual home work; they must write essays every two days, learn to develop their own opinion and to be able to articulate it – which is very different from what is done in most Uzbek universities.⁷³

Success in quality education has been achieved by elite Turkish lyceums that enjoy great prestige across Central Asia. A young Kyrgyz said: “We have no modern textbooks, and the only good school here is the Turkish school because they all know three languages, they have modern textbooks, [and] their teachers are well paid. That is the model to follow but none of our teachers will do it; they will not change their attitudes”.⁷⁴

Turkish lyceums are effectively the last functioning schools in Turkmenistan. In Uzbekistan, where they have been banned, their methods and even textbooks are still being used unofficially by teachers who formerly worked in them.⁷⁵ Although the selection makes those schools elitist, they provide substantial grants for gifted students regardless of economic status.

Computerisation of schools is a popular slogan in Central Asia, and an easy route for donors to demonstrate commitment to education. In reality, computers may have little real impact. Very often, they are installed but no staff are trained to use them confidently. Internet surfers have a very limited view of the capacities of the web, as a Dungan student explained: “Most people don’t know how to use the

internet, and if so, only for a site providing ready essays in Russian for students and for e-mail service. That’s all – people don’t know what other uses there are for the internet”.⁷⁶

Often equipment just disappears. A Tajik school student said: “In my school, we got two computers – now they are in the houses of the director and his deputy”.⁷⁷ Some of this is a question of priorities. Tajikistan has a national program for computerisation of schools, yet many of its schools have no electricity. Computers are not a panacea for improving education. Funding better teaching and textbooks is probably more important in the long run.

Political ideology

In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in particular, the education system is further undermined by a high level of political control. In Uzbekistan President Karimov’s numerous books are part of the higher education curriculum and must be mastered to enter university and pass graduation examinations. Young Uzbeks are not encouraged to express opinions:

Last week, during our political education class, I said that Uzbekistan is a developing country – and got strongly criticised by our teacher because he could not permit a different opinion, and made a point of saying that Uzbekistan is a developed country. I was called anti-patriotic, and not allowed to express myself.⁷⁸

On the contrary, students are taught to conform to the official line, as this example shows:

Our rector gathered all students to inform us that Uzbekistan fully supports U.S. action in Iraq. But when we asked him – do you personally support this? – he refused to answer and avoided the question completely. We are all opposed to the war; we discuss it among us as a wrong and terrible thing – but if you ask us publicly, in the university, we will all say what we have been told to say.⁷⁹

⁷² ICG interview with NGO activist, Tajikistan, April 2003.

⁷³ ICG interview with Abdujabar Abduvakhitov, rector of the Westminster International University in Tashkent.

⁷⁴ ICG interview with Kyrgyz youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁷⁵ ICG interview with Samarkhand youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003. Most of these Turkish schools are funded by a private foundation in Turkey with an Islamic basis, although they provide secular education. Their origins may have contributed to Uzbekistan’s policy towards them.

⁷⁶ ICG interview with youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁷⁷ ICG interview with Dushanbe youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

⁷⁸ ICG interview with Tashkent students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁷⁹ ICG interview with Bukhara students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

In Turkmenistan the cult of personality of President Niyazov is imposed in schools via the compulsory and almost exclusive study of his book the *Rukhnama*. Political ideology undermines even basic education. One parent complained “Why should I send my daughters to school? All they are taught is the *Rukhnama*, the Holy Book of Turkmenbashi, what use will they have for this in real life?”⁸⁰

In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan this stultifying control is producing a generation fearful of open discussion and seldom able to form independent opinions. This has obvious consequences for the prospects for political pluralism but it also affects the employability of graduates. As one foreign businessman in Tashkent asserted: “It’s difficult to find people who can see both sides of an argument, reach an independent conclusion and follow it through. Students are too used to waiting to be told what to think’.”⁸¹

Deregulation

As their finances have shrunk, the Central Asian states have withdrawn from education, leading to deregulation of higher education. This is most notable in Kyrgyzstan and least in Turkmenistan. Public, private and international universities have emerged and largely been welcomed as a sign of liberalisation of society that allows more people a wider range of places to study. However, because standards are not monitored, the resulting chaos has weakened the general quality of education.

The reason for this laissez-faire approach has been a general lack of long-term strategy in higher education. Education ministers, who are replaced rapidly, cancel the policy of their predecessor and introduce radical changes with little attention to continuity or sustainability. They must obey political orders and lack independence. As a consequence, individual university leaders become the real decision-makers, establishing new universities or diversifying existing ones as they wish, with little reference to an overall strategy. Often parliamentary deputies or businessmen establish their own institutions in order to win constituents. New curricula are established without the necessary trained staff or teaching materials, and state licences are often either bought or simply ignored by universities.

One consequence of this anarchy is that there is a huge mismatch in subjects studied. Parents, who usually choose studies for their children, openly prefer what they consider the most prestigious faculties of law, international relations, economy and diplomacy. They believe such diplomas open doors to jobs in law-enforcement agencies where corruption will allow the cost of education to be recovered.⁸² Every year an enormous number of law and economics graduates compete in an already saturated market.

The situation is more acute in Kyrgyzstan. When it gained independence, it had ten universities for a population of 4.5 million. In 2001, it had 60 registered universities with over 110 branches, for a population approaching five million. In many cases, universities sprang up without much forethought, largely as a commercial enterprise. This has undermined standards in many places but the state is beginning to reassert some control, and more importantly parents are beginning to understand which universities offer credible education, and which are merely vehicles for fast profits. The situation is much better than in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan where the number of would-be students by far exceeds available positions.

B. ECONOMIC ISSUES

The problems of education are intimately linked to the other major concern in young people’s lives: getting a job with a living wage. “In our times, no one finds a job related to what they have studied”, is a leitmotif across the region. As a young Uzbek university professor told ICG: “For most people, what matters is just to get a diploma, of any kind, because you won’t find a job according to your knowledge”.⁸³ A diploma is seen as necessary but providing no guarantee of employment.

There are no reliable figures on youth unemployment in Central Asia, but the U.N. gives a figure of 20 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, which is probably understated.⁸⁴ The economic problems facing Central Asian states do not only affect young people, of course. The decline in GDP experienced in the whole region in the first half of the 1990s has

⁸⁰ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, May 2003. Also, see ICG Report, *Cracks in the Marble*, op. cit.

⁸¹ ICG interview, Tashkent, September 2003.

⁸² ICG interview with Bishkek youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁸³ ICG interview with Bukhara professor, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁸⁴ See UNSTATS, Millennium Indicators database, 2000.

been reversed but growth is still sluggish, hardly keeping pace with the population. Relatively liberal states such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are making some progress, but headline growth figures do not always reflect a growth in living standards for the whole population. In Uzbekistan, where bad economic policy decisions have hit the private sector and limited foreign investment, the economy has probably not grown at all in 2002-2003 and may even have gone into recession.⁸⁵

Young people often rely on families to get a first job. In state structures, a combination of connections and money are needed to get on the first rung of the ladder, and most positions can be bought. The same is true in much of the private sector, and even in some international organisations.

Small private business is an option only if one already exists in the family, usually as a small retail shop. To start a business from scratch is a challenge, given the many financial and administrative obstacles, as a frustrated young Uzbek recalled:

We have very good laws on paper, but in reality it is the opposite. I could not open an internet café because they kept changing the laws almost every month, and after obtaining five licenses, I still cannot open my internet café.⁸⁶

School or university education gives few of the necessary skills to develop good business ideas, and young people are usually excluded from capital as high risk. But the biggest problem is government policies that make small business development a struggle for survival. As a young Uzbek student in Kyrgyzstan said:

I still think I can come back to Uzbekistan and start a business there with protection from my family – but of course I will have a business here and in Kazakhstan where things are more real and feasible compared to Uzbekistan.⁸⁷

Despite efforts such as the U.S.-funded business support program Pragma to help young entrepreneurs start new businesses, only in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have young people had much success. Even there the obstacles are too great for most young people to think of running their own business.

Much of the education system is skewed in favour of 'prestigious' higher education subjects, such as law or international relations, while there is a shortage of students with vocational skills.⁸⁸ In Kyrgyzstan the number of vocational colleges has dropped sharply, and parents push their children towards higher education, which is considered more prestigious. While plumbers are becoming a scarce commodity, unemployed lawyers abound.

When searching for employment for a graduate, parents seek a position available through the protection of a member of the extended family. The former student is expected in return to serve and obey his or her relative and help as much as possible, even for free for a certain period and with difficult tasks. The young person who does this well might advance as the relative climbs the career ladder because trust is essential in an environment where many issues relate to not fully legal activities.

This system is self-perpetuating. Bright young people, who may initially be interested in improving the situation in their country, gradually find themselves drawn into the same system of corruption and nepotism as their parents. Even those who study abroad often end up in ministries on small salaries and with little hope of advancement without connections. Kazakhstan has more than most achieved a generational change in its civil service, bringing in many younger professionals, often with degrees from Western universities. An older generation still dominates in many ministries in other Central Asian countries.

Youth unemployment will only be solved in conjunction with wider improvements in the economy, as proposed by ICG in more detail elsewhere. Economic progress is having an impact on young people in Kazakhstan, where a new generation is growing up with some confidence that it will be able to begin careers in its own country, either in the private sector or government. But the contrast is becoming starker in Uzbekistan and

⁸⁵ Official figures suggest growth of around 4 per cent but some international financial institutions suggest that there is essentially zero growth. ICG interviews, Tashkent, August 2003.

⁸⁶ ICG interview with Tashkent students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁸⁷ ICG interview with Uzbek student, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁸⁸ ICG interview with UNICEF Assistant Project Officer Marianne Ohlers, Kyrgyzstan, July 2003.

Tajikistan where few young people see viable economic opportunities unless they are members of elites. For most, especially in rural areas, the answer lies in migration, either to cities, or abroad.

C. SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Young Central Asians are searching for role models in a society very different from that of their parents. However, the main state, political and social actors are still thinking along Soviet lines. Already frustrated by economic hardship, young people get even more depressed when they face the lack of social integration for their group, the absence of attractive role models, or the difficulties they have becoming involved in political life or developing their own models of family life and community.

Central Asian governments have tried to replace Communist slogans with nationalism but the message does not seem to get through to younger generations. Before 1991, youth were enrolled at a very early age in ideological organisations: at age ten, Soviet children could become ‘pioneers’, and at fourteen, they joined the Communist youth movement, the Komsomol.⁸⁹ Participation was important to gain privileges such as access to higher education and better jobs. The groups organised free leisure camps, travel, festivals, concerts, and local and national competitions. The parents of current Central Asian youth went through this system, and some feel nostalgia.

After 1991, the organisations were dismantled, and national ideologies replaced the Communist heritage. The new states understood the importance of enrolling young people in nation-building and promised special attention and policies because they had been among the most politically active in the late 1980s.⁹⁰

But just as maintaining a Soviet-style education network proved too much for Central Asian budgets, keeping up with Soviet standards of ideology was unattainable. Many summer camps and sport and cultural activities were abandoned. A new ideology and set of role models for youths has also not been

achieved. While denouncing Communist youth ideology, Central Asian leaders have been unable to distance themselves from the Soviet system, except for a few cosmetic changes in wording, symbols and historical references.

Central Asian states never were independent within their current borders before 1991. Leaders quickly sought new forms of legitimisation, initially mostly relying on ethnic nationalism, which quickly became a major force in determining laws on citizenship, language, and education. History was revised to reflect the new reality.

In Kyrgyzstan, the *Manas*, a stirring oral epic of ancient nomadic warriors, has been used as an integral part of nation-building. Yet, it portrays a feudal society with little appeal to women and ethnic minorities. A young Uzbek student from Osh complained that “we have to take a course of Kyrgyz philosophy entirely based on the *Manas*, but we are not nomadic warriors anymore”.⁹¹ Even for young Kyrgyz such appeals to their past offer little guidance for coping with present realities.

Similarly in Uzbekistan, another medieval leader, Amir-Temur (Tamerlane) is presented as a national hero and a role model for youth. Young educated Uzbeks see little connection with their lives: “The period of invasions and massive killings orchestrated by Amir-Temur is over; we live in the 21st century now”.⁹²

One consequence of the nationalism in youth ideology is a lack of ethnic integration in all five republics. Many minority ethnic groups – particularly non-Muslims who do not have extended families and cannot rely on family networks for jobs – are particularly frustrated: “We as Russians are discriminated against in government structures, and more harassed by the police because we have no protection, no extended family, and they know that”.⁹³

The youth organisations that have grown up, such as Kamolot in Uzbekistan, are dominated by older officials with little understanding of the real needs or aspirations of youth. Teaching young people to

⁸⁹ “Pioneer” referred to the first level of political involvement, while “komsomol” was an abbreviation for Communist Youth Union.

⁹⁰ For example, Kazakh students demonstrated in 1988 for an ethnically Kazakh leadership in Soviet Kazakhstan.

⁹¹ ICG interview with Uzbek student, Kyrgyzstan, January 2003.

⁹² ICG interview with Tashkent youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁹³ ICG interview with Russian youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

'behave' or 'conform' is seen as much more important than supporting their aspirations and addressing their problems.

Youth organisations are also plagued with corruption. Abusing their authority, officials manipulate funds for private interests. As one Uzbek student explained, "from our monthly 9,000 sums grant (U.S.\$9), a lot gets confiscated for various reasons such as compulsory fees to the Kamolot state youth organisation, even though we never ever see the benefit of it".⁹⁴

But the major problem is that young people, as a rule, have no role in decision-making processes of official youth organisations and in society at large are largely excluded from political life. The main result of this suffocating youth ideology is general disinterest and lack of political involvement. Young people simply do not recognise themselves in the model imposed by state structures. Obedience to elders, eternal patience for economic development, and extreme restraint in opinions are hardly appealing to young people who are exposed to more liberal and participatory models via Russian television, the internet, seminars and interaction with foreigners and NGOs.

The other major socialisation institution in the USSR was the army. For young males, the Soviet army played an essential role in social integration, providing travel, education and some level of work and language skills. Although all Central Asian states still draft young men for military service, their critically under-funded armies no longer play this role. Equipment and conditions are poor, and there is little prestige; reports are widespread of bullying and brutality, and there are frequent accidents, including lethal ones. Young men from wealthy or connected families can buy themselves out of military service, increasing discrimination towards poorer segments of society.⁹⁵

Non-state structures, such as the few opposition political parties or human rights groups, do not fare much better in involving youth. Apart from seeking

their votes at elections – just as the government does – opposition political parties seldom put programs for young people in their agendas. Most are led by older men, often former members of the Soviet system or the early post-Soviet governments, and have a similarly paternalistic view that youth "needs to be guided" and not listened to and can be manipulated for political goals.

In the end, young people feel they are politically abused and used by both the state and the parties: "When I went to vote at the university polling station for the parliamentary deputy election, my voting bulletin was already signed and cast, so what is the point of voting then?"⁹⁶

Young people are pessimistic about their capacity to play a role in society, as a Dungan explained:

As youth we have no way to influence society – we have no rights. When the police arrest us in Bishkek to extort bribes, we get scared and pay or run away. We don't believe we can do anything. There were no anti Iraq-war demonstrations, nothing during the presidential referendum because there is nothing we could do that could change things.⁹⁷

According to a survey in Uzbekistan, almost one third of young people admitted they would give up if their efforts to solve a problem met with any difficulties.⁹⁸ This passivity extends to youths' general appreciation of life as well as their studies. Students in Karakol (Kyrgyzstan) said:

Most students have a very passive attitude about their studies. They take it as a long, paid holiday with little to do, just attending a few classes, eating, having fun and going home and [to] sleep. Most do not even think that with so many economists or lawyers, there will be almost no jobs for them. So they go

⁹⁴ ICG interview with Bukhara youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

⁹⁵ Kyrgyzstan is preparing a law that will allow young men to skip army service for a fee, formalising an already established procedure. Similar possibilities are available to young men in Uzbekistan who do not wish to serve. See Ulugbek Babakulov, "Kyrgyz army law controversy", IWPR, 19 December 2002.

⁹⁶ ICG interview with Osh students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁹⁷ ICG interview with Tokmok youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

⁹⁸ See *Socialnyi portret molodezhi Centralnoi Azii v aspekte obespecheniya gosudarstvennoi i regionalnoi bezapostnosti* [A social portrait of youth in Central Asia from the standpoint of state and regional security], Izhtimoi Fikr Centre for Public Opinion, Astana-Bishkek-Dushanbe-Tashkent, 2002

back to the village and live with their parents at home – and become farmers with a Ph.D.⁹⁹

Much of this passivity results from the system in which they grow up. They see that energy and entrepreneurial spirit seldom achieve results and that family connections are more important than ambition and education.

1. Leisure and Sport

Leisure and sport have particularly suffered from the budget cuts following independence, as it was never given top priority in nation-building. In the Soviet period, leisure facilities were widespread in both urban and rural areas and offered choices: movie theatres, even in small villages, youth theatre, ballet, dancing groups, hobby circles, youth television and newspapers, contests, discos and sport centres. Many young people had sports careers, later becoming trainers and teachers.

Central Asian youth have few remaining facilities, as much infrastructure has not been maintained. In many rural areas, cinemas and youth clubs have closed, are rented out or are falling apart: "Even when young people decide to rebuild a youth centre, the whole place gets robbed again, people take the wiring at night, and it becomes useless very soon".¹⁰⁰

When maintained and privatised, the leisure structures have become too expensive for many. Good discos charge up to U.S.\$5 for entry. In most places, discos are the only place of leisure left, but there is a lot of pressure to close them because of prostitution, drug use and constant fights.

Sport infrastructure is also missing in most areas. In Nukus, in the remote Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan, a would-be sportsman says: "There are absolutely no structures for youth here. I want to do sport – but there is nothing, you have to pay to do sport in bad conditions, no heating, no equipment, no water – so I don't go. There is nothing for young people but vodka".¹⁰¹ Karakalpakstan is particularly poor but other regions are not much better off.

Uzbekistan has a sports policy that looks good on paper, and often reflects a genuine desire to give

young people more access to sport and better facilities. But too often it seems aimed more at grandiose gestures and major construction projects than at involving as many young people as possible. Corruption scandals have hampered efforts to build up infrastructure. A new stadium has been built in Bukhara but local observers claim it has eaten up the city's budget for two years, a number of contractors have not been paid and the stadium is empty and almost never used.¹⁰² Similar stadiums are being built in other major cities. They are popular with local officials who can gain lucrative construction contracts, but seem to have little impact on most young people. Instead of huge, costly stadiums, young people need a network of low-cost facilities, such as clubs and small sports halls.

Sports policy seems to be decided on the basis of the latest elite fad rather than consultation with young people. President Karimov supported tennis in the mid-1990s, and even provincial towns such as Namangan have expensive courts. But few young Uzbeks can afford the fees or the equipment, and it is not a popular sport.

Young people generally complain there are no places to go, nothing to kill time:

Sport is quite expensive, except for bodybuilding for guys, or basketball and football, but again this is all concentrated in cities. In the villages, we have no stadium, we play on the road. We have no libraries and no books. We have no television except state television.¹⁰³

A similar situation prevails in media: "There is no real youth mass media because it is controlled by older people who are afraid youth could say something inappropriate".¹⁰⁴ The content of newspapers for young people is also controlled to promote state ideology. A majority of those interviewed said they watched only Russian satellite television. The only young people who watch local television – a dreary mix of folk songs and propaganda – and read local newspapers are in rural areas where nothing else is available.

⁹⁹ ICG interview with Karakol students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁰⁰ ICG interview with students, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁰¹ ICG interview with Nukus youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁰² ICG interview with Bukhara NGO leader, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁰³ ICG interview with rural students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁰⁴ ICG interview with Dushanbe youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

Youth organisations across the region need to review their mission. In many cases their failure is due to not listening genuinely to the interests of youth, and instead seeking to impose their own vision of what young people should be like. This is detrimental to a dialogue between state and society: from an early age, many young citizens develop mistrust towards officials who speak in their names but often act against their interests.

Young people need a chance to get involved in organisations that make decisions on their behalf in schools and universities, youth organisations or local community groups. They are now exposed to global satellite television and the internet and have their own references and role models that should be part of a representative youth ideology.

Central Asian states should promote a proactive policy of civic education and encourage youth groups to discuss social and political issues and propose solutions. This is partially achieved by a number of NGOs across the region, but usually with resistance or opposition from the government. Central Asian governments need to permit social and political activism among youth, and international donors should continue their efforts to build up youth clubs and discussion forums. Many problems faced by young people result from boredom. Much could be done to expand sport, training and leisure facilities, but with the emphasis on local, low-cost solutions, and not major infrastructure in big cities serving elites.

As for cultural life, the efforts of both governments and international donors are insufficient. The former have been unable to come up with creative ideas and usually maintain the Soviet traditions of folk dance festivals, and similar 'patriotic' activities. The latter have developed a number of exchange and cultural programs for youth, but these reach only a small proportion.

Media is an important area. A few programs have been launched with international support and should be extended: an alliance of five independent radio stations in Kyrgyzstan covering specific youth issues, or Radio Salaam, a station mostly run by young people in Batken, in remote southern Kyrgyzstan. Such projects are successful because they use a language familiar and appealing to youth.

2. The Family and Community

The lack of youth clubs, organisations, or leisure facilities leaves little space for young people to develop independently of family or state. The family role in their lives is very significant, serving both as a major source of support but also an obstacle to personal aspirations and development.

Since sending a child to university is a large investment, very often, as a young Uzbek student explained, "parents make the decision after holding a family council, especially if money needs to be put together by uncles and other relatives to support the student for five years".¹⁰⁵ If there is the possibility of a job, a similar family council is held to collect money if necessary. This process puts a youth in double-debt, having turned to families to fund education (U.S.\$1,500 to U.S.\$10,000 for a five-year curriculum), and then using the same source to pay for entry to the job market (perhaps spending U.S.\$500 to U.S.\$5,000 or more for a good position). Even very poor families use the same system, but their opportunities to buy their children education and access to good jobs are obviously much more limited.

Young people are also dependent socially and financially on their families when getting engaged and married. A wedding is an important social ceremony underpinning the status of the family and is thus celebrated formally with hundreds of relatives and neighbours at a feast that can take up to three days. Animals are slaughtered, and the families of both bride and groom must give expensive gifts or large sums of money. This is particularly true for villages, but also in towns in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

It has become such a financial burden in recent years that some Central Asian governments have sought to ban expensive weddings via statements of religious authorities. Yet, this has had little effect as preserving the reputation of a family is more important than the debt. Social pressure for big weddings is so high that when a family cannot afford one, it postpones or cancels the marriage, with little consideration for their children's desires.

Prearranged marriages are still the norm, particularly in more traditional communities, and money plays a key role. They often mean early marriage, at sixteen

¹⁰⁵ ICG interview with Uzbek youth, May 2003.

for girls and eighteen for boys in rural areas, particularly in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

Newly married couples are expected to have a child within one or two years:

Many young people get married only when their parents deem it the right time. [Parents] choose a spouse for their sons and daughters and keep them at home, feeding and providing for all costs, and pushing immediately for grand-children, even if none of the parents has a job".¹⁰⁶

Young parents must have a child to show that they are healthy and fertile. A baby means the wife is even less likely to go to work, thus increasing economic dependency on parents for newly weds.

For the majority of young people unable to find or buy employment, the only solution is to return home and stay with parents. Returning to the village is not such a burden as long as parents have a farm.¹⁰⁷ Many are given manual jobs – young married women often serve in-laws almost as unpaid domestic help, and young men work in fields or look after cattle. In urban families, returning home is more problematic because living space is scarce, and there is no alternative revenue to compensate for additional expenses.

This multi-layered dependence on parents and relatives is encouraged by elders because pensions and the health system are largely non-functional, and it is expected that children will take care of aging parents.¹⁰⁸ Rural Muslim parents rely on traditions requiring the youngest son to stay in the house to take daily care of them.

This system of mutual support in many ways compensates for the lack of state support. But many young people also complain of the suffocating dependence upon parents and relatives in villages: "We are not allowed to voice our choices and desires, because elder relatives take all the decision

for us, and no one rebels, even if they break your dream of a career or marriage".¹⁰⁹

The result of these contradictions is a confused social identity for many young people, who often find contradictory models of family life, and sometimes combine both. While the majority of rural families retain a traditional family model of absolute obedience to parents and elders, a more Europeanised model, in which individual choices are more dominant, has developed in urban areas.

Traditional families are rooted in the pre-Soviet model that stressed reputation, solidarity and conservatism. It is in some ways a source of stability, limiting public displays of discontent or conflict with the authorities. Retaining traditions is fundamental to this social model. Marrying outside the community, living far away from parents, or allowing women to work outside the house tend to be discouraged. A student in Uzbekistan said:

My parents are very afraid for me to leave for Tashkent – where I want to study. I have to help out my sisters, and my parents as they grow older. They want me to find a job in Nukus so that I can stay with them and protect my entire family.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, the Europeanised family model is based more on individualism, with less attention to cultural traditions. Parents adopting this model usually have fewer children, more freedom is given to youths, and decision-making is more of an inclusive process. Children are consulted on their choice of studies, and daughters are more likely to have a say in weddings and allowed to study at university or even carry on with a career.

The European model is more common in urban areas among Russian-speaking communities, regardless of ethnicity,¹¹¹ and has been largely incorporated in Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies that are less attached to tradition and have been exposed to Tsarist, Soviet and Russian influences since the eighteenth century.

¹⁰⁶ ICG interview with young Kazakh, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Over 60 per cent of the 50 million Central Asians live in rural areas.

¹⁰⁸ Except for Kazakhstan, pensions average U.S.\$5 to U.S.\$15 monthly while hospitals are de facto at the cost of patients for all services.

¹⁰⁹ ICG interview with Uzbek youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹¹⁰ ICG interview with Nukus student, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹¹¹ The term European refers in Central Asia to non-Muslim ethnic groups such as Russians, other Slavs and Balts, Jews, Germans and Greeks – but is often extended to Russian-speaking groups such as Koreans or Russian-speaking members of the dominating Muslim group.

But it would be too simplistic to divide Central Asia into traditional versus European models. Families often mix elements from both models, which can be a source of conflict and resentment. As a young Uzbek student expressed it: "I would put my son into a Russian school, so that he becomes smart, and my daughter into an Uzbek school, so that she doesn't get wrong habits and ideas".¹¹² This attitude reflects a wider gender divide:

In traditional families, girls are not allowed to go out after a certain hour, are not encouraged to study very long. I know many Uzbek girls who at sixteen or seventeen only want and hope to get married soon, and that is their life's dream. They are encouraged to remain ignorant and that is dangerous because they have absolutely no knowledge of life. Mentally, physically, emotionally they are simply children and not ready to get married.¹¹³

Indeed, in traditional families it can be perceived as a dishonour to the family (particularly the father) if the young women needs to study away from home where her behaviour cannot be so closely monitored.

Economic and social change in many ways will undermine the traditional family structures, as more young people move to cities or abroad. The consequences are far-reaching. In Uzbekistan constant referral to traditional values by the authorities is partly based on their own desire to maintain political control. The reconstitution of the old *mahalla* (neighbourhood community) institution as a state-dominated body reflects this artificial use of traditional community structures for social and political control.¹¹⁴

Economic necessity is breaking down some of these social structures. The challenge for Central Asian societies is to retain cultural values, while enlarging the scope for personal choice and giving young people a chance to make their own futures.

¹¹² ICG interview with Ferghana youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹¹³ ICG interview with Namangan youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹¹⁴ A number of international observers describe the *mahalla* in Uzbekistan as an autonomous form of grassroots democracy (for example, Gregory Gleason, "Uzbekistan: Country Report", Freedom House, 2003). It may have been so at one time, but in its current incarnation it plays an important role in state repression and is an ever-present source of state interference in personal lives. See Human Rights Watch, "From House to House: Abuses by Mahalla Committees", 23 September 2003.

III. ALTERNATIVES FOR YOUTH

Some young people overcome the difficulties of getting an education, finding a job and establishing their place in the community and family, and begin to develop successful careers in private business, NGOs or international organisations. Some have gained opportunities that were not open to their parents, learning foreign languages, studying at Western-style institutions such as the American University in Bishkek, and travelling abroad.

These young people are a potential new elite, with much better chances of success than many of their peers but they remain very much the minority. The majority are more poorly educated than their parents, find it difficult to get regular work, and have no voice in the community or political system. Many disenchanted young people seek alternative choices outside conventional society and find more fulfilment in three strong elements of a new youth culture: religion; violence, crime and abuse; or labour migration.

A. RELIGION

The majority of young people in Central Asia claim to be religious – only 5 per cent of young people in Uzbekistan consider themselves atheists, although that rises to around 20 per cent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and 50 per cent in Kazakhstan.¹¹⁵ The overwhelming majority are Muslims, mostly Sunnis. But the picture is also quite fragmented, ranging from radical Islamist groups to those who reject religion, claiming that it is a serious obstacle to personal and social development and a source of violence. Regardless of their attitude, young people are targeted by religious leaders as the group with the greatest potential to fill mosques, churches and temples.

Most young people grew up as children in Soviet society, hearing that religion was dangerous. Nevertheless, many experienced the secret practice of religion, which enhanced its prestige as something

¹¹⁵ See Sotsialny portret molodezhi tsentralnoi Azii v aspekte obespecheniya gosudarstvennoi i regionalnoi bezapostnosti [A social portrait of youth in Central Asia from the standpoint of state and regional security], Izhtimoi Fikr Center for Public Opinion, Astana-Bishkek-Dushanbe-Tashkent, 2002.

prohibited, slightly dangerous and thus attractive.¹¹⁶ Since independence, religion has been rehabilitated for the officially sanctioned forms of Sunni and Ismaili Islam, Judaism and Russian Orthodoxy. New forms such as Protestant churches, Hare Krishna, Baha'i, Buddhism and sects have also developed rapidly, as well as old unofficial forms of spirituality such as Shamanism and Sufism, thus completely changing the spiritual landscape of Central Asia and providing a wide choice of faiths for young people.

For certain communities, however, religion is more than a fashion; it is a core component of their cultural identity. Religion explains origins and brings prestige to the group. It provides a substitute for a Soviet identity that had negated entire parts of the cultural heritage of many nations. It recreates rituals, networks, and activities that strengthen a rediscovered identity. It becomes a source of pride, and of visibility and reaffirms a sense of solidarity and protection from external social, political, economic or ethnic threats.

It is noteworthy that migrant youth from villages seem to be more prone towards religion as it fosters solidarity in a hostile environment.¹¹⁷ This explains the growing number of young men at Friday prayer in mosques in once overwhelmingly secular cities:

Newcomers move into the city and replace the departing Russian-speaking groups. They dress very traditionally, and follow Islam much more. Their children spend more time within the family, and much less in schools – so they take more the family model, and turn to Islam.¹¹⁸

It is important to note the wide variety in religious custom in Central Asia. Among Muslims, those mostly identifying strongly with Islam, particularly in rural communities, are Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and Dungans,¹¹⁹ as well as some Tatars, Caucasians, southern Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Being Muslim is a strong attribute of group ethnicity. Failing to practise or abandoning Islam is considered as breaking away

from the group, as a young Dungan underlined: “We are very religious, we pray five times a day – we preserve our traditions and language, learn Arabic, and have a sense of community”.¹²⁰

Most children are brought up in households where religion is predominantly cultural, and few receive deep knowledge of its fundamentals. Religious education for children is still rare and is banned completely in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, in strongly Islamic communities such as the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan, Muslim boys are sent from age twelve to madrasas – schools of Islamic teaching where they are taught the Koran, Arabic and Muslim law. Madrasas are usually attached to a mosque, and the local imam and teachers are in charge. A former student described the experience:

There were 100 of us, living, eating and sleeping in the madrasa and coming out to see our parents only once a month. We woke up for the first prayer at around four a.m., studied, slept at eleven for an hour, had lunch, and studied Arabic and the Koran till five p.m., played sport, prayed, and went to bed. It was a very strict regime. We had shaved head, wore Pakistani clothes, and there was severe discipline for those who smoked or used drugs.¹²¹

After four to five years of studies, the most talented male students from these madrasas are sent to Pakistan, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries to continue religious studies in prestigious Islamic universities, sidestepping official controls over foreign religious education.¹²² An Islamic education obtained abroad is perceived as more genuine and thus culturally more powerful. In Central Asia itself, higher education in Islam or even in Arabic is rare, controlled by the state,¹²³ and thus regarded as less prestigious. Those who study in Central Asia, however, perceive Islam as central to their cultural identity:

Many students study in the evening or in our distance learning department. We warn them

¹¹⁶ ICG interview with Tajik youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹¹⁷ ICG interview with Karakol youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this tendency to seek solidarity in deeper religious faith is also evident among some Central Asian migrants to Russia.

¹¹⁸ ICG interview with Dushanbe youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹¹⁹ The Dungans – called Hui in China – are ethnic Chinese who adopted Islam during the Middle Ages and migrated to Western China and Central Asia.

¹²⁰ ICG interview with young Dungans, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹²¹ ICG interview with former madrasa student, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹²² ICG Asia Report N°59, *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, 10 July 2003.

¹²³ For a detailed description, see *Ibid*.

that very few will become mullahs, so they have to think of a real profession to feed their families. Many study Islam for themselves, as a purely personal interest because it was difficult in Soviet times to learn about real Islam in a deep way – but then they work as drivers, or in other jobs.¹²⁴

Not only Muslims are experiencing a spiritual renaissance. Ethnic Koreans, Germans and Poles, as well as some Russians seek a revival of their community via religious activities and define Christianity as essential to their life in Central Asia. For some Christian minorities, religion also becomes a way to protest against what they perceive as Islamisation of Central Asia, where they feel they no longer have a place in society.

Shamanism, already practised in Central Asia when Turkic groups migrated into the region from Siberia, is also experiencing a revival. In the context of a crumbling medical system and social decay, some Central Asians, particularly Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Turkmens, turn to shamans in difficult moments: “My father got sick, and the doctor couldn’t do anything, so we called the shaman who prescribed to buy and kill a snake, eat the meat and apply the skin on my father’s legs”.¹²⁵

While for some religion marks a return to cultural roots, for others spirituality is a way to find order in life, transcending cultural and ethnic identities. Religion is perceived as a ready moral code – with possible social or even political implications – that can fill the ideological vacuum. According to a young imam:

Young people are getting more interested because after the euphoria of independence, they have tasted many systems, many things – but today they realise this ‘democracy’ does not mean much and does not bring much – so they turn back to religion and God and come to the mosque.¹²⁶

Young people seek a code of conduct and antidotes to the depression and confusion of their parents, who

experienced sharp ideological collapse in their lives and are unable to guide their children through what they sometimes perceive as social chaos. Religion in this context provides an entire ideological system with ready-made rules, authority figures, and hierarchy, as well as taboos, punishments and rewards. As one expert says: “Young people come to Islam because in our troubled times, they want clear rules that say what is right and what is wrong”.¹²⁷

Some tendencies in Islam, such as Wahhabism or the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, propose more radical solutions, often with a program of political action. Hizb ut-Tahrir has focused strongly on young people in its recruitment campaigns.¹²⁸ First, it proposes a project – the establishment of a Caliphate that would bring education, employment and prosperity to all. Even though this goal might seem utopian, it addresses many of the issues youth have to struggle with.

Secondly, it offers immediate action via distribution of leaflets, public expression of discontent, enforcement of ‘decent behaviour’ upon other people and the wearing of head-scarves for women. Such activities contribute to the establishment of a strong identity and create an heroic image much sought after by young people who lack role models relevant to everyday life. As a young Uzbek pointed out: “The Hizb ut-Tahrir people are very good at manipulating, at making heroes out of people because they get beaten up, jailed, tortured. Their women wear scarves and they all distinguish themselves as local heroes, and get admired by the masses”.¹²⁹ Moreover, Hizb ut-Tahrir’s approach is youth-friendly, not requiring knowledge of Arabic and using direct, everyday language with easy slogans and the tools of Internet and computers to add to its modern image.

Finally, in countries like Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir’s relative success among young people comes from being almost the only channel of political criticism of a strict regime, its form of Islam a moral opposition that contrasts with the corruption and abuses of the leadership.

New Christian groups are equally successful in attracting young Central Asians, particularly in

¹²⁴ ICG interview with teachers at Dushanbe’s Islamic University, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹²⁵ ICG interview with young urban Kyrgyz, Kyrgyzstan, January 2003.

¹²⁶ ICG interview with young imam in Karakol, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹²⁷ ICG interview with teachers from Dushanbe’s Islamic University, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹²⁸ See ICG Report, *Radical Islam*, op. cit.

¹²⁹ ICG interview with Tashkent youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, by promoting strong ethics and strict morality. An observer noted in Uzbekistan:

Some young people do go to those new Churches, they work in small groups or cells – and it is quite incredible. You see people who drank and smoke – they stop that and all mix together: Karakalpak, Kazakh, Russian, Koreans. Probably because there they get listened to, and they learn to listen, too. They find people who understand them there; that's why it is so popular I think.¹³⁰

Material benefits, many acknowledge, are an important motivation for youths to become religiously involved. A young Tajik convert to Christianity said: "I agree maybe 60 per cent of people go to church because of the benefits: clothes, food, entertainment, language classes – but the rest mean it and have been going for years".¹³¹ There have been allegations that Hizb ut-Tahrir uses money to bring in new members, even though it does not seem of primary importance.¹³²

Free education provided by religious communities is another incentive for new members. In Uzbekistan, madrasas students acknowledge they study there because it is their only access to education, since tuition is much cheaper, and lodging and food are provided by the Muslim community.¹³³ A similar situation can be seen in Tajikistan: "The first reason why students pick our Islamic University is the very low tuition fees: about U.S.\$10 to U.S.\$30 per year whereas most universities ask up to U.S.\$800 a year just for tuition in Dushanbe now".¹³⁴

Certainly not all young people believe religion can answer their questions. Many complain it is a source of conflict. Supporters of religion are found predominantly among Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmens and rural youths with little education, while secular views are popular among Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Russians and generally among urban residents with greater education.

Among the latter religion is associated with old traditions, seen as a brake to development and emancipation and opposed to individualism. According to a young Kyrgyz: "I don't go to the Mosque, never read the Koran – I don't understand the language in this book. I think we Kyrgyz have lost our connection to Islam, unlike the Uzbeks, and it is a good thing because we have become freer; we do what we want".¹³⁵ Many young people say that the conservative views of religious leaders prevent open discussions on sensitive issues such as gender equity, reproductive health, and drugs.

Some origins of this attitude can be traced to Soviet-era anticlericalism, but part is a practical approach to life that concentrates on economic survival. Pragmatically-oriented young people, especially in urban communities, concentrate more on quality education and good jobs:

Personally, I don't want to be involved in politics or religion – I stay away from that. All I care for is to solve my economic crisis and feed my family – not get married too early – but just make a living. That is all that is important now.¹³⁶

In their view, religion should be limited to festivals and rituals without spiritual or philosophical meaning. The civil war has accentuated this view among some young people in Tajikistan: "I don't think people will ever support the Islamists again. When we got independence, we were told we lived for 70 years in a Soviet prison. Now we realise we lived for 70 years in paradise compared to our life today".¹³⁷ In rural areas, mostly in less religious Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Islam is sometimes ignored because economic necessities take precedence over religious duties. A Kyrgyz villager explained:

We have no sponsor to build a mosque, so we just have a big prayer room. Even though it is Friday, the holiest day of the week, there is no one there. That is because young men work twelve hours a day in the field and get drunk

¹³⁰ ICG interview with Nukus youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹³¹ ICG interview with Tajik Christian convert, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹³² See ICG Report, *Radical Islam*, op. cit.

¹³³ ICG interview with Nukus madrasa students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹³⁴ ICG interview with teachers from Dushanbe's private Islamic University, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹³⁵ ICG interview with young Kyrgyz, Kyrgyzstan, February 2003.

¹³⁶ ICG interview with Bukhara students, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹³⁷ ICG interview with Tajik youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

afterwards, so they have no time and no desire to spend time on religion.¹³⁸

This lack of interest in Islam is noticed in even traditional societies such as Tajikistan where the number of students of religion is in decline: “There used to be ten candidates for one position before, now it is two to three per position”.¹³⁹

Young people are viewed and used by different religious leaders as a weapon in the competition for spiritual dominance in Central Asia. Muslim as well as Christian and other groups try to attract young believers in order to legitimise themselves.

1. Conflict Within Islam

Islam in Central Asia is deeply divided along the line of official, state-backed Islam and unofficial and often underground Islam, sometimes influenced by radical Wahhabi ideas from outside the region. Young people are often caught up in this competition.

Official Islam was heavily controlled during the Soviet period and infiltrated by the KGB. Today state-controlled Islam remains dominant, although levels of control differ from extreme in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to more liberal in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Combating radical or politicised Islam is largely the responsibility of representatives of official Islam, who are often uneducated, unmotivated imams who offer a version that is rather dull and limited for young people. In many cases, an imam is primarily an administrator who enjoys the same privileges as other governmental officials.¹⁴⁰ Being a mullah is a good way to make money:

There is internal competition. Mullahs who have a very poor knowledge of Islam do not want younger ones to hold positions, because they are afraid to lose their market of paid rituals – and that is a serious obstacle, the tremendous corruption by mullahs of the old school.¹⁴¹

A young Tajik commented:

All depends on the local mullah – people will do exactly what he says, even if it contradicts Islam. I used to go to the madrasa, where we were only taught to read and repeat Arabic, without any explanation. So I bought a Russian translation of the Koran, and started asking the mullah – but he kicked me out when I tried to prove [to] him he was wrong. In the end, I left the whole thing.¹⁴²

The religious hierarchy and the state response has proved inadequate to cope with the challenges of tendencies in Islam introduced from outside. An NGO activist in Uzbekistan pointed out:

A lot of young men were misled, some were intelligent and thought they could achieve justice as they were taught [abroad], others were uneducated and naïve – and they all got jailed for many years. The best of our generation is in prison. This is our fault; it is a terrible mistake because now of course they hate society and when they will come out, it will create trouble again.¹⁴³

This creates real conflicts in small communities where there is a divide, sometimes along generational or gender lines, when deciding which imam to listen to. An imam in Kyrgyzstan said:

I am 70. I studied in China and Tashkent, and what – I am nothing compared to young brats who studied three years in Pakistan, Egypt and claim they are ‘scholars’! But these are all Wahhabbi. They know nothing of our Islam and pretend to be the real Muslims. They say we old people are good for nothing – it is nonsense, and if I speak my mind too much, they will kill me, I know. Now no one comes to me. It is the end of Islam!¹⁴⁴

2. Christianity Versus Islam

Official and unofficial forms of Islam are not the only forces in competition. Central Asia – particularly more liberal Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – has become a field of operations for new religions

¹³⁸ ICG interview in Kyrgyz village, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹³⁹ ICG interview with teachers from Dushanbe’s Islamic University, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁴⁰ “Our mullah’s father was a very famous mullah so the people of the village forced him to become a mullah in Soviet times but he is very uneducated and drinks a lot”, ICG interview in village, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁴¹ ICG interview with young imam, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁴² ICG interview with Tajik student, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁴³ ICG interview with NGO activist, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁴⁴ ICG interview with former imam, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

and sects, all rivals among themselves and against state-approved Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy.

The new Christian churches – mainly evangelical and Protestant – and sects such as the Unification Church, New Life, and Falun Gong¹⁴⁵ are particularly successful at gaining new adepts because of their aggressive policy. Offering activities that are very appealing to young people and backed by overseas communities in the developed world, they proselytise via personal contacts, television and internet. Education is often used as an approach tool: “At our university, one of our American teachers of literature was a Baptist; he was sent away because he was actually teaching religion during the class”.¹⁴⁶

The prestige attached to foreigners is a strong incentive. A Kyrgyz student explained: “New Life opened an English language club right in front of the university, showing films, and regularly enrolling young Kyrgyz, especially women. Many become Christians because it is cool to hang out with a foreigner; all of a sudden you become someone important”.¹⁴⁷ Often Christian propaganda takes subtle forms, so that most are unaware of the proselytising: “In our village, there is a Swiss teacher of English at the Uzbek school. She organised a summer camp singing Christian songs about Jesus, but no one in the village realised they were repeating Christian songs; they just thought it was traditional Swiss folklore”.¹⁴⁸

Many young Central Asians are frustrated with the conservatism of their imams and priests and say that the new religions have an articulate language that is lacking in official mosques and Orthodox churches: “I asked my Orthodox friend why he became protestant: he told me that new Christians know how to speak to people, how to answer questions whereas when he used to go to the Orthodox church, he only got to pray and repeat, nothing more”.¹⁴⁹

Official Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy complain they cannot compete fairly because they lack financial and human resources but a young Tajik

insisted: “Once we Muslims have the money, we will talk smart like Christians, and they will lose.”¹⁵⁰

This emerging conflict is present in the entire region, including rural and urban areas. Muslims feel particularly threatened. A young Tajik woman complained: “I am very annoyed by Christian missionaries – because they use and abuse the situation of people who are in a difficult time to manipulate them. I was told by some new Christians that Islam for women means sitting at home and never going out. When I asked them if they had read the Koran, they said no!”¹⁵¹

Religious conflicts also splits families and communities. A Tajik student noted that:

Some parents have thrown their children on the street after finding out they became Christians. I think the main problem is not that they became Christians but that people in the mahalla [neighbourhood] will start talking. The gossips, the opinions of relatives and neighbours – that is what scares people.¹⁵²

A young Dungan told ICG how her community has been affected: “One Dungan became a new Christian, which of course is extremely shocking for us because Dungans are supposed to be the most Muslim. All his relatives have shunned him and won’t even greet him in public. Only his wife stayed because of the children”.¹⁵³

In general most Central Asians react with considerable tolerance to other religions, even new sects, but there have been cases of violence with tragic endings leading to death and terrorist attacks. In 2000 several Christian churches in Tajikistan were bombed; in one such attack in October 2000, apparently by two students of the Islamic Institute, seven people were killed. Two leaders of the Bahai religion were killed in Tajikistan in 2001.¹⁵⁴ Even in rather tolerant and less religious Kyrgyzstan, new

¹⁴⁵ Falun Gong – also known as Falun Dafa is a spiritual movement based on yoga, Taoist and Buddhist teachings. It was founded in China, where it is banned, by Li Hongzhi, now in exile in the U.S.

¹⁴⁶ ICG interview with Osh student, Kyrgyzstan, June 2003.

¹⁴⁷ ICG interview with Osh student, Kyrgyzstan, June 2003.

¹⁴⁸ ICG interview with Uyghur youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁴⁹ ICG interview with youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁵⁰ ICG interview with Tajik youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁵¹ ICG interview with young Tajik woman, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁵² ICG interview with Tajik youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁵³ ICG interview with youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report: Tajikistan, 2002”, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13985.htm>.

Christian converts in ethnically Kyrgyz villages have provoked tensions.¹⁵⁵

3. Government Responses

Possible religious conflict has provoked varied responses from Central Asian governments, but in most cases the central theme has been control and suppression. While all denominations, Muslim and Christian, were tolerated in the early 1990s, the late 1990s witnessed a U-turn, particularly towards non-traditional forms of Islam. Wary of the spread of Wahhabi tendencies, governments expelled any foreign Muslim missionaries back to Pakistan, Turkey and the Middle East. But the policy of strict control has often been an overreaction that sometimes seems destined to provoke the very radicalism it is designed to prevent. Many ordinary Muslims have been caught up in a widespread clampdown in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have strict controls on religious education, effectively outlawing Islamic teaching to children and young people.¹⁵⁶ A recent Uzbek government decree on religious education holds out some hope for a more liberal approach, but overall policy has been aimed at restricting religious education to a minimum. As a result, there is no control over what is taught in illegal house study that has become widespread. Government policy effectively puts Hizb ut-Tahrir, Wahhabi groups and orthodox Muslims on the same footing when it comes to education.

The Tajik state is also concerned with control over Islamic teaching but in practice is more tolerant towards private teaching, usually in unofficial – and illegal – circles.¹⁵⁷ In Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan, as well as in other isolated communities, the madrasa is often the result of a local initiative. For example, many madrasas in the Chui valley near Bishkek are funded by donations from the Dungan community to encourage less religious Muslims to receive an Islamic education. The state has little or no control of the management and the teaching inside these schools. Few officials have any idea what is taught or whether children also get a secular education.

Uneducated official religious workers are unable in most cases to give clear responses to questions: “There is very little knowledge about Islam. Some women set themselves on fire because the Koran allegedly says so – they say so out of ignorance, repeating rumours and words of old mullahs”.¹⁵⁸

There is often great inconsistency between what is preached and what is done by imams or priests who speak against drinking, smoking, womanising, trafficking, stealing, and lying. As a young Kyrgyz citizen said:

Young Uzbeks and Dungans go to the mosque to pray but they don't have a deep knowledge of Islam. Besides, the mullahs are often very contradictory: as we say here, if in doubt, ask the mullah and then do exactly the opposite of what he told you. A lot of mullahs drink, and smoke. It is difficult to respect them.¹⁵⁹

Not only are official Islamic structures sometimes discredited, but also the attraction of alternative Islamic groups is growing. The flow of recruits to Hizb ut-Tahrir and other extremist groups is at least partly a response to the inadequacies of official Islamic representatives, who have little knowledge of young people and are unable to address their problems in a language they understand. Hizb ut-Tahrir, with its more modern idiom and rather simplistic answers to everyday questions, fills a niche left by official Islam.

B. VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Crime, drugs, and alcohol abuse all provide an alternative escape for many young people from their often unattractive everyday reality.

1. Crime

The first years of independence were marked by an explosion of crime all over the former Soviet Union. Crime became a way of survival because the entire social and economic system collapsed along with state control, and it became easy to obtain weapons, connections, documents and money to commit crimes.

¹⁵⁵ Sultan Jumagulov, “Muslim anger over Protestant convert”, IWPR, April 2002.

¹⁵⁶ ICG Report, *Islam and the State*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ ICG interview with UNICEF staff, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁵⁹ ICG interview with youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

Central Asia was particularly undermined by criminal groups because drug trafficking was increasing through the region from Afghanistan. The 1992-1997 civil war in Tajikistan showed that a drug-based economy and society could replace the rule of the law.

Most 'high-level' crime, that carried out by organised groups, has been absorbed to a greater or lesser extent into state structures. Mafia groups have either been taken over by law enforcement agencies or they operate with the full knowledge and often support of government officials.

Petty and street crime is the result partly of economic decline, but also of the simple boredom of unemployed youths. A young Karakalpak explained:

Kids do not go to school, they just hang around the house and get drunk, then they see a neighbour or someone passing by, they threaten and attack him out of pure boredom, get into a fight and return home. The next day they go to the police because the person complains, and then another fight starts. And that goes on everyday.¹⁶⁰

Moreover, crime has provided role models for young people, with complementary fashion, attitudes, and images. It often takes the form of street gangs in villages or cities, who impose their rule over a certain territory. A student in Kyrgyzstan described this street violence, witnessed all over the region:

There is an ongoing undeclared conflict...local young people...beat us up or extort money from us in order to show who is the real owner of a territory. So you need to fight back and impress them or you get severely beaten up.¹⁶¹

As with religion, the state's response to youth crime has been largely based on repression. Legislation does not differentiate significantly between severe and light crimes in terms of sentencing, and there is little or no reintegration policy for young criminals. As a result, some young people get harsh sentences – up to several years – for minor crimes. In some cases, they are targeted because they are completely

unaware of their rights and end up paying for the crimes of others, as an activist explained:

Very often, the police find a poor guy and put all the crimes on him to get rid of an old case. They simply beat and torture him, so he signs, gets eight years, and the police officer gets a pay rise for solving so many crimes at once. Since young people drink a lot and easily get into fights, it is very easy.¹⁶²

2. Alcohol and Drugs

The vodka culture is part of the everyday life of young people in Central Asia. Still available at very low, subsidised prices or brewed at home, hard liquor remains an easily affordable escape for many young people, both male and female. Across the region, bored or depressed youths get together, start drinking and act in a state of drunkenness that is the prelude to most violence and crime. A young Kyrgyz acknowledged that:

The main problem is that all men here drink terribly. They work very hard in summer and autumn – but in the evening and in winter all they do is drink and then get into fights. If you stay here, you get married, and work the field, that's it.¹⁶³

Alongside alcohol abuse, drug abuse and its most immediate consequence, the spread of HIV/AIDS, are having a terrible impact.¹⁶⁴ While HIV prevalence remains under 1 per cent according to official figures, it is rising faster in the former Soviet Union than anywhere else in the world and seems likely to go up even more sharply in years to come. Most infection is the result of injecting drugs, a practice that has developed fast, with an estimated half-million injecting drug users in the region, of whom 70 to 80 per cent are likely to become HIV-infected.¹⁶⁵ In Kazakhstan, the most affected country, over half of HIV-infected persons are aged 20-29, and most are unemployed young men.

A medical doctor in Uzbekistan explained:

¹⁶⁰ ICG interview with Nukus youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁶¹ ICG interview with American University student, Kyrgyzstan, June 2003.

¹⁶² ICG interview with NGO inmate rehabilitation staff, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁶³ ICG interview with rural youth, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁶⁴ For a fuller discussion, see ICG Asia Report N°25, *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, 26 November 2001.

¹⁶⁵ World Bank, "HIV/AIDS in Central Asian Countries", briefing, 12 March 2002.

Hard drugs used here are mostly heroin that is either inhaled or used via needles. Prices have grown dramatically. One gram of heroin costs U.S.\$60 – three times the average monthly salary. If the heroin is inhaled or smoked, the effect is strong but with 0.1g injected, the effect is the same.

The economics of drugs thus explain a boom in drug injection, which has been accompanied by a predictable rise in HIV cases. About 80 per cent of HIV patients in Bukhara are injecting drugs users (IDU). Officially there are 820 hard drug addicts in Bukhara itself, but in fact the real figure is around 5,000, of whom 40 per cent are IDUs.¹⁶⁶ Drug consumption is widespread among all social categories of men, regardless of economic status. Among women, prostitutes and young women are the most likely users.

Many factors explain the explosion in drug consumption in Central Asia. Children and young people often receive little respect and attention at home from parents who have little time, energy and money to spend on them. Given the general lack of structures and activities designed for them, young people are left to their own devices. An attraction of the drug culture is that it is one of initiation, to which a person is admitted only after testing but then becomes a recognised member of a community.

Another important factor is the lack of clear parental guidance. A drug specialist told ICG:

Children are brought up in world of double standards. Parents say one thing and do the opposite because they are under economic pressure. A father might teach his children not to steal, but he himself has to steal at work to make both ends meet at home. Thus the distinction between what is good and what is bad is blurred.¹⁶⁷

Finally, Central Asia is a culture of approving and not challenging authority, particularly that of older people. As the same doctor explained: “It is extremely difficult to say no. Here is a culture of ‘yes’, of acceptance from anyone who is older. As it is not nice nor polite to refuse, people will take drugs

if it is requested by a representative of authority in a circle”.¹⁶⁸

Since most factors for drug consumption point towards failures of family and state, parents and officials are often reluctant to recognise the problem. Parents refuse to admit or even recognise it within their family, for fear it will become public knowledge. There are reports of family members who are drug addicts being put under ‘house arrest’, chained to a bed for a week, beaten up by relatives, and threatened, or even killed, by desperate relatives who then declare the youth died in a street fight.¹⁶⁹ The social stigma attached to drug addiction makes prevention very difficult.

In most cases, the government is equally reluctant to assume responsibilities. This creates a dangerous state of naiveté, as pointed out by a young Uzbek:

This situation makes young women very vulnerable to the dangers of drugs, abuse, manipulation, prostitution, and sexual diseases because they are artificially kept ignorant. Most people refuse to consider that narcotics – which is the biggest danger for youth now – could happen to us. They think it only happens to others, just like sexual diseases, alcohol, and smoking.¹⁷⁰

The Uzbekistan government has been slow to admit the real figures of drug addiction. Drug users brought to hospital are treated for a few days to overcome the crisis and then sent home without counselling or help. An NGO activist complained: “People are very afraid to go to needle exchange points because it brings shame on the entire family, even sisters of addicts cannot get married because they are suspected of being drug-addicts”.¹⁷¹

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have adopted more realistic and courageous policies by recognising the problem and allowing a number of pioneering programs that were later extended to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, such as methadone use and needle-exchange programs.

¹⁶⁶ ICG interview with medical specialist, Bukhara, Uzbekistan, March 2003. HIV/AIDS issues are discussed further below.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ ICG interview with medical staff, Bukhara, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁷⁰ ICG interview with youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁷¹ ICG interview with NGO activist, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

Turkmenistan has adopted the most dangerous policy of doing little to decrease drug consumption and turning a blind eye to the fate of addicts. President Niyazov is reported to have been involved in drug-trafficking¹⁷² and has occasionally praised drug consumption – officially illegal – in public speeches. As a result of the low price of drugs and the state of desperation of the people, drug use among Turkmenistan's youth has increased sharply. As Turkmen students told ICG:

As for drugs, everyone does them. There is not a single family where one member is not sitting in prison for a drug-related crime...Virtually everyone is on drugs, and hard drugs are very popular – sniffing heroin particularly.¹⁷³

While drugs were mostly in transit to Russia and Turkey in the early 1990s, local consumption has now developed, mostly in capital and medium-sized cities on the routes. In those places, drug dealing has become a way to make money rapidly for idle youth. For the poor, the only way to continue buying drugs is to get involved in crime, to force wives or children into prostitution, or to find more addicts to whom to sell. A network has been established that targets the children of rich families: drug dealers are paid up to U.S.\$100 for each new drug-user they find, usually among rich families that will provide money at least for some time until the addiction is discovered.

Drugs have become part of the lifestyle of Central Asian youth not only because they carry a commanding image of power, and of being cool. but also they mean money. A young Tajik recalls:

We grew up seeing the drug mafia openly dealing, the big cars and tough guys, just like in movies. In schools and universities, students went to classes with guns and threatened any teacher not giving them the best marks. People were injecting drugs publicly. Now it is all hidden. Just two or three big guys control the whole thing, pay off the police and the business continues but in a hidden way. But everybody knows a lot of people made all their fortune in the drug business and it continues.¹⁷⁴

A student reported a similar situation in Turkmenistan: “My neighbours deal drugs, everyone knows it, and the policeman comes, obviously gets his share of the business, and then goes away and doesn't bother them. It is really supported and encouraged by the government at a national level”¹⁷⁵

In Kyrgyzstan, traditional forms of drugs coexist with hard drugs. A young Kyrgyz said: “We grow poppy in our region, so it is a good business to sell it to students in Kara-Kol, where there are about 40,000 students. It is cheaper than hard drugs, and people buy it – some become students just to sell it to others”¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, hard drugs penetrate the country from the south.

If they are to address the drug issue, governments must look at the real causes instead of only interdiction. Drug abuse is now an internal problem in Central Asia, and governments should be transparent about this to save lives. More information is needed for the public, and the social stigma attached to drug users should be lessened. The pioneering projects of needle-exchange points and methadone have proved successful enough to be extended as widely as possible.

3. Prostitution

Prostitution, which has been boosted by extreme poverty and social breakdown, is also found at the nexus of drugs and crime. Part of why it is increasing are the high levels of domestic abuse and forced marriages. According to an Uzbek NGO activist:

Prostitution is on the rise, because women who divorce from forced marriages have no skills and can't feed their children. There is a human bazaar where women stand and get into cars...sometimes those women never reappear”.¹⁷⁷

But poverty and the lack of alternative well-paid employment is the major cause of prostitution. Young Uzbek women from Uzbekistan travel to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan to become sex workers where the police are more liberal and the population more prosperous. Some of this is voluntary; some is close to trafficking, with women held in apartments and often having their passports taken away from

¹⁷² See ICG Report, *Cracks in the Marble*, op. cit.

¹⁷³ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, May 2003.

¹⁷⁴ ICG interview with Tajik youth, Tajikistan, April 2003.

¹⁷⁵ ICG interview with students, Turkmenistan, May 2003.

¹⁷⁶ ICG interview with student, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁷⁷ ICG interview with NGO activist, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

them. Trafficking further afield is also on the rise, particularly to South-East Asia and the United Arab Emirates. A survey of women aged sixteen to 22, conducted by the Open Society Institute in Uzbekistan, found that 95 per cent wanted to work abroad; 80 per cent did not realise the dangers of traffickers.¹⁷⁸

Against such a backdrop, it is easy for unscrupulous people to deceive women with offers of work abroad. Most who travel to work abroad, whether in the sex trade, or in ordinary casual labour, do so voluntarily and are not necessarily caught up in trafficking, at least narrowly defined. However, a significant minority become involved in situations in which they lose freedom of action and can be considered as trafficked persons.

'Tourist' companies send girls off to work as 'waitresses', but the reality is usually much grimmer. Little attention is given to this problem, since many officials are reputedly involved in the trade. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs recognised that "there is corruption and some officers in the Ministry [of Interior] are believed to be involved in the trafficking of people...but no concrete facts are available".¹⁷⁹ Customs officials, border guards, and other security sector officials, as well as transport and airport officials throughout the region are also reputedly involved.

None of the Central Asian governments has made a serious effort to tackle this kind of criminality and corruption. In fact, trafficking cases are frequently covered up because of official complicity. The authorities also often directly profit from the sex and labour trades when the victims return to their home countries. Harassment of sex workers is especially brutal. They report blackmail by the police and other authorities with threats to spread information about their prostitution in their communities.¹⁸⁰

Alongside overt prostitution, there are further layers of sexual exploitation of young women. A relatively new phenomenon is developing: the appearance of very young second or third wives within Muslim

communities. The Koran allows up to four wives but young second wives have all too often quite literally been sold by parents who see the husband as the economic rescuer of their daughters, who sometimes are as young as fifteen.

Such young women are deprived of any support, even from their original family, as a young Uzbek explained to ICG:

Parents very seldom encourage girls to study: they say, all you need is to get a rich husband. Some parents agree to sell their daughters as second or third wives – unofficially of course, but everybody knows. If husbands mistreat their wives, they get no support from their parents. No one wants scandals and girls are told: he is your husband now, whatever happens, you have to stay with him. Anyway, how could you support yourself since you have no skills or education, so you just cannot escape him; it is your fate.¹⁸¹

Since the law does not recognise more than one wife, second or third spouses are in a very unstable situation, completely dependent on the good will of the husband.¹⁸² This phenomenon is growing in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – in the latter also because of the number of war widows and women whose husbands have gone to Russia to seek work and not returned.

Male prostitution is very new in Central Asia but is becoming more visible mostly because of massive unemployment. Men looking for construction work and other heavy labour at bazaars are approached by men and women for sexual services.¹⁸³ A new human trafficking network is being developed that sends young men to the Middle East for prostitution.

The international community has begun to draw attention to the trafficking issue, and governments are slowly realising that they will need to address it. The Uzbekistan government is opening up to cooperation, and some of the taboos are slowly being broken. In Kyrgyzstan there is increasing NGO activity but still too little official attention.

¹⁷⁸ Information provided at International Organisation for Migration (IOM) conference on trafficking, Almaty, April 2003.

¹⁷⁹ IOM/Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), "Trafficking in Women and Children from the Kyrgyz Republic", January 2001, p. 27.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. and IOM, "Deceived migrants from Tajikistan: A study of trafficking in women and children", July 2001.

¹⁸¹ ICG interview, Bukhara, March 2003.

¹⁸² Many children are born from second or third wives and have no legal papers. If the father abandons a second or third wife, mothers often have no other option but prostitution or abandoning their children.

¹⁸³ ICG interview with Andijan journalist, Uzbekistan, April 2003.

4. The Threat of AIDS

The danger is that the combination of widespread prostitution and drug consumption will lead to a significant increase in sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV-infection. Officially the number of people who are HIV-positive has reached 50,000 in Central Asia in 2003, compared to 2,600 two years earlier.¹⁸⁴ Both figures are almost certainly underestimates of the real situation, but there are several explanations for this recorded rise. First, there is better mapping of the infection, which means that HIV-positive patients are more likely to be identified. Secondly, widespread human-trafficking and migration within and across Central Asia have boosted prostitution and thus HIV infection through sexual transmission. A third explanation is the explosion of intravenous drug consumption discussed above.

Despite common aspects, the situation varies considerably across the region. Kazakhstan, which is believed to have 25,000 HIV-positive patients, – is by far the most threatened. According to a Human Rights Watch report: “Over 80 per cent of HIV-positive persons are estimated to be drug users. Kazakh authorities reported that in 2001 alone the number of HIV infections rose by about 240 per cent”.¹⁸⁵ Even though the government has agreed to a needle-exchange program, most intravenous drug users and sex-workers suffer from social ostracism and police harassment and are afraid to seek treatment.

In Kyrgyzstan, the epidemic was contained for a long time, with an official figure of less than ten HIV-positive persons for ten years. Since 2001, however, the disease has spread. The official figure is around 400, but experts estimate the real figure is probably ten times higher.¹⁸⁶ The south of the country is the most affected, with over 65 per cent of the cases registered in Osh, Jalal-Abad and the Batken region, those areas most affected by drug use.¹⁸⁷ The government was the first to introduce needle-exchange programs and methadone

treatment but needs additional human and financial resources to cope with the epidemic.

In Tajikistan it is estimated that 90 per cent of HIV-positive patients are intravenous users of drugs (IDUs). Given the estimated figure of 100,000 IDUs, the future looks grim.¹⁸⁸ The average age of an IDU is 20 to 30. Because of large-scale labour migration to Russia, where an AIDS epidemic is raging, it is expected that the sexual transmission of HIV will rise to alarming levels if counter measures are not quickly introduced.

Uzbekistan long denied it was significantly affected by AIDS epidemic and has only recently allowed research and needle-exchange programs. The official figure for this nation of 25 million is 2,700 cases, yet experts suspect the real figure is at least ten times higher.¹⁸⁹ Similarly to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is vulnerable unless it takes drastic action because of the growing IDU population, estimated to be at least 200,000. Growing prostitution is also a major cause of transmission. The use of condoms is still limited and not accepted by most clients. As a medical student from Nukus said:

If you ask STD doctors, they will tell you that many men and women are sick, and a lot don't even know about it. A lot of people do shuttle-business, drive across the region and spread diseases. Even when the government distributes condoms – people get them and sell them on the market, and nobody really cares.¹⁹⁰

Turkmenistan denies that it has an HIV problem and refuses to conduct research to assess needs. Given widespread drug-addiction and prostitution in Ashgabat and along the Caspian Sea, the figures are likely to be high, but the population is left without any information or means to protect itself.

Overall in the region, the full scale of the AIDS threat is not acknowledged. Even in Kyrgyzstan, cited as a relative model for prevention, the education ministry threatened to ban a model textbook on healthy lifestyles that included information on

¹⁸⁴ See HIV figures for Central Asian States, Special Program for HIV Prevention in Central Asia, at www.hivca.kz, January 2003.

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan. Fanning the flame: how human rights abuses are fuelling the AIDS epidemic in Kazakhstan”, at www.hrw.org, June 2003.

¹⁸⁶ See HIV figures for Central Asian States, op. cit.

¹⁸⁷ IRIN-OCHA, “Kyrgyzstan: HIV situation in south continues to worsen”, 4 June 2003, at www.irinnews.org,

¹⁸⁸ The World Bank Group, “HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia”.

¹⁸⁹ IRIN-OCHA, “Uzbekistan: HIV/AIDS on the rise, experts say”, 23 June 2003, at www.irinnews.org.

¹⁹⁰ ICG interview with medical student, Nukus, March 2003.

contraceptive use, allegedly because of pressure from family and Muslim groups.¹⁹¹

Knowledge about AIDS remains low. Sex education is limited in many areas, and use of contraceptives is the exception. Governments need to resist pressure to limit sex education and awareness campaigns. Intensive work with youth should be carried on using a format geared to young people. In Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF is adapting a Thai project, "Friends tell Friends on the Street", with interactive games and activities that are designed to provide street children with knowledge and skills on issues of reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and substance abuse prevention.¹⁹²

C. MIGRATION

For many young people the rational response to the problems they face at home is to leave. According to a survey, over 70 per cent of young people in Central Asia are ready to migrate to 'any country'.¹⁹³ Migration has become a major factor in young people's lives and has long-term social, economic and political consequences. It occurs at several levels, from village to city, from southern Central Asia to the more prosperous north, and outside the region completely, to Russia and beyond.

Perceived from outside as a homogenous region, Central Asia is in fact very diverse. Each of the five republics has developed its society and economy very differently from its neighbours. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan stand out economically from the others because of their relative liberalism, and in the case of the former, relative prosperity. As one observer noted:

Young people in southern Kyrgyzstan try to go to Bishkek to find work, young people from Bishkek try to go to Almaty, and those from Almaty try to go to Moscow to find work. Most probably those from Moscow want to go to New York!¹⁹⁴

A small part of Kazakhstan's oil revenue is redistributed to the population, producing much

higher salaries and pensions in comparison to its neighbours. Kyrgyzstan remains poor but allows small business to develop somewhat and has currency convertibility. This contrasts with Uzbekistan, where land ownership, independent and protected private business, and convertible currency remain dreams for average citizens.¹⁹⁵

A growing number of Uzbeks, Turkmens and Tajiks are attracted to northern Central Asia by the promise of economic freedom and higher wages that can be turned into U.S. dollars. The capitals and larger cities of all five republics have had some economic development due to concentrations of political power and international presence.

Consequently, there is huge village-to-city migration all over Central Asia, and an increasing seasonal or more permanent migration from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. A Tajik seeking work on the labour bazaar explained that Kyrgyzstan is a land of opportunity for unemployed Tajiks: "I fled after the war – and now I am here to try it out... On average, I make U.S.\$50 a month; it is hard, but still better than Tajikistan".¹⁹⁶

Moving to Russia is seen as a better choice because of the greater economic potential. Given the relative prosperity of that country, many manual jobs are now being offered to migrants from the former Soviet Union. Central Asians willingly take work on constructions sites and farms and in factories, restaurants, cafes, kiosks, and small shops. From the point of view of a young Uzbek taxi driver, Russia is a land of plenty:

I worked six years in Russia. I was selling clothes at markets, doing all kind of small jobs and business. Then, I got back here, and bought a car... Here you can never put money aside – it is just enough to feed my family... In Russia, you can make U.S.\$100 to \$500 a month – here nothing. If it wasn't for my old mother, I wouldn't have come back.¹⁹⁷

Qualified young people are leaving en masse, citing the lack of career opportunities in Central Asia, as

¹⁹¹ See Leila Saralaeva, "No sex, please, we're Kyrgyz", IWPR, 11 July 2003.

¹⁹² ICG interview with UNICEF Assistant Project Officer Marianne Ohlers, Kyrgyzstan, July 2003.

¹⁹³ Socialnyi portret molodezhi [A social portrait], op. cit.

¹⁹⁴ ICG interview with young staff member of an international organisation, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2002.

¹⁹⁵ ICG Asia Briefing, *Central Asia: Last Chance for Change*, 29 April 2003.

¹⁹⁶ ICG interview with young Tajik migrant, Kyrgyzstan, May 2003.

¹⁹⁷ ICG interview with young taxi driver, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

opposed to possibilities in medicine, or computer science in Russia. A young Uzbek explained:

I am a computer designer and won second place in a national contest of web design. I used to work for a private TV station that was making money but then it got closed by the authorities because we were too independent, so I lost my job. My mother works in the gas industry, but half the year she does not get her salary so she has to go to the bazaar to make a living. This is why I am moving to Moscow...I will look for a computer job there...and earn money to send it back here for my mother and sister. I see no future here.¹⁹⁸

Tajiks who fled the devastating civil war and obtained refugee status were the first Central Asians to migrate in large numbers to Russia. After a few years, many decided to stay and bring relatives or friends to develop economic activities. It is estimated that over 800,000 Tajiks go back and forth between Tajikistan and Russia – about one third of Tajikistan's labour force.¹⁹⁹ Most migrants, including a large proportion of women, are in the 20-40-year-old category. Their integration in Russia is not very successful. Marked by their appearance, their accents and the importance they attach to religion, they are often the target of police harassment – tens of thousands of Tajiks are reported to be in Russian prisons²⁰⁰ – and the victims of violence by neo-fascist groups. Many live in terrible conditions.²⁰¹ For some Tajik women, migration ends with being forced into prostitution or drug smuggling.²⁰² An international observer told ICG:

Tajiks are the most vulnerable because they have no structures, no lobbies like the Chinese or Vietnamese...Only two NGOs are helping them in Russia.²⁰³

The Kyrgyz are historically the second largest group of Central Asian migrants in Russia. With a generally better knowledge of Russian than Uzbeks and Tajiks, they find it easier to integrate, particularly in Siberia and Central Russia where most live and have recreated entire communities.

The Uzbeks have always been less enthusiastic migrants but in the past few years their numbers have grown swiftly. Numerically, they are second among Central Asian migrants, with an estimated one million concentrated in Russia's major cities and in Western Siberia.²⁰⁴ For a long time, Uzbek citizens believed in the economic potential of their country – but the non-implementation of real reforms has led to massive unemployment, growing poverty and a lack of even minimal freedoms that are now boosting massive migration among all the country's ethnic groups.²⁰⁵

Official statistics are unavailable but there has been a constant flow of qualified Turkmens – both ethnic Turkmens and members of the Russian, Uzbek and Kazakh minorities – to Russia and Kazakhstan.

Migration is mainly perceived as a solution to economic hardship. For some, it is limited in time and understood as way to obtain starting capital for a future business at home. This is particularly true for young people who are in debt to their parents or wish to start a business. They migrate to Kazakhstan or Russia for a couple of years to accumulate funds and then return to take up independent lives. This seems to be a particularly successful strategy for young people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Remittances are important sources of income for many families in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and in this way migration has a positive impact on living standards. But migrants from those two states tend to stay longer in Russia, and repatriation gradually decreases as migrants settle and begin new families. An observer noted: "People who do well economically do not come back and do not repatriate their investment here. They marry in Russia, create families and jobs and have no plans to return for long here".²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁸ ICG interview with Bukhara youth, Uzbekistan, March 2003.

¹⁹⁹ Most observers indicate that from 500,000 to 1.5 million Tajiks go abroad to find work. See ICG Report, *Tajikistan: a Roadmap for Development*, op. cit.

²⁰⁰ RFE/RL Transcaucasia and Central Asia Newline, "Number of Tajik migrant workers dying in Russia reported to be rising", 22 July 2003.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² IOM report, "Deceived migrants from Tajikistan", op. cit.

²⁰³ ICG interview with Igor Bosc, IOM representative in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, April 2003.

²⁰⁴ Ulugbek Khaidarov, "Uzbek migrants' Russian Dreams Shattered", IWPR, 2 March 2003.

²⁰⁵ ICG Asia Report N°46, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program: Illusion or Reality?*, 18 February 2003.

²⁰⁶ ICG interview with Soros Foundation staff, Dushanbe, April 2003.

Many Uzbek and Tajik migrants bring home less than U.S.\$1,000 a year, which they spend rapidly on weddings, festivals or reconstruction of flats and houses. Then, without having saved much, they have to leave again: “Migrants who go back and forward make very little money because they have unskilled work, thus have little to save, and therefore no money left to invest in the country – so really very little money goes back to Tajikistan for big investment”.²⁰⁷

Migration can be physically dangerous as many have no social security or access to health care in case of accidents or illness, and some fall prey to human traffickers.²⁰⁸ Tajiks, for example, frequently work in factories in Siberia where there is little regard for safety standards of the health of migrant workers. According to a Tajik sociologist: “Most Tajik migrants who die in Russia are not victims of racism but of deadly accidents at the workplace. Every single train coming back from Russia carries coffins and mutilated people”.²⁰⁹

Lack of adequate information also presents risks for migrants. Even crossing a border can be problematic. A bus driver explained:

It takes seven days to drive to Moscow from Bukhara. The worst problems are in Kazakhstan because they have everyone get out, and they confiscate a lot. If you have a Tajik passport, it is even worse. They ask U.S.\$200 just for a transit fee; otherwise they simply kick you out of the bus.²¹⁰

Many young women have ended up in sexual slavery because of their ignorance of the risks, and many young men are not aware of dangers at construction sites and industrial plants. Information campaigns on the risks of migration and of human trafficking need to be stepped up across the region, but the wave of migration is unlikely to stop until Central Asian governments can offer real economic prospects to young people at home.

IV. CONCLUSION

The responses of Central Asian governments to the problems of young people have been diverse. In education, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seem more determined to change the situation and have taken serious steps to improve the general quality of the system with the assistance of international donors and organisations. Tajikistan has faced real problems finding the financial resources to rebuild its education system, but has also been slow to tackle serious corruption in aid programs in this area. Uzbekistan has been strong on rhetoric and has promoted some programs, such as allowing young Uzbeks to study abroad, for example, but many in the elite retain a fear of allowing too much autonomy to the rising generation and continue to insist on significant levels of political control over young people. Turkmenistan has taken this to its ultimate extreme, severely limiting education and strictly enforcing ideology at all levels.

While education is in crisis and needs a complete review of finance, organisation and training, there is still enough human potential to reverse trends and implement a transparent, equitable and modern system that is open to the world.

However, better educated Central Asians will have greater chances for employment and will create their own enterprises only if economic reforms are finally implemented, and transparent structures are built to encourage small and medium business. Administrative obstacles and harassment by lobbies affiliated to the state and protected by law-enforcement agencies are the most serious impediments to the active involvement of youth in Central Asian economies. This situation fuels widespread unemployment and migration.

Violence must be defused by creating a constructive dialogue with young people and giving them effective means of access to real decision-making. Governments need to acknowledge legitimate voices of frustration and try harder to create space for youth social and political activism. Special efforts are needed to encourage better Islamic education in order to undercut the appeal of underground groups and radical tendencies. Finally drug-consumption and AIDS must be addressed as top priorities considering the way they are rapidly threatening youth and future generations. It is not too late to tackle these issues but decisive action must be taken

²⁰⁷ ICG interviews, Dushanbe, April 2003.

²⁰⁸ For Kyrgyz victims of slavery in China, see “Na kitaisko-kirgizskoi granitse zaderzhali rabov” [Slaves detained at Sino-Kyrgyz border], 20 August 2003, at www.centrasia.ru,

²⁰⁹ ICG interview, Saodat Olimova, Tajikistan, April 2003.

²¹⁰ ICG interview with bus driver, Uzbekistan, April 2003.

before young people lose hope that the region will change.

The international community can do much more in this area. There is a real chance to have an impact on the future of the five countries by promoting education at all levels, through programs linking infrastructure improvements, teacher training, and provision of classroom materials such as better textbooks. Such programs need to be long-term and carefully thought through. In many cases, they are better approached through independent resource centres, local community networks, or associations that include parents, teachers and other parties rather than through bureaucratic education ministries.

Teachers are a key constituency group that is too often ignored. Renewing the teaching profession through opportunities for study and retraining, resource centres and in some cases additional stipends, could have a significant impact on the education system. Changing the content of education to encourage more creative and independent thinking is vital to produce a new energy among youth. Good teachers are well positioned to produce this change in mentality.

Turkmenistan's education crisis is too profound to be ignored. There may be little that can be done within the country, but increased educational opportunities abroad would at least provide the basis for future generations to restore their country. Funding for Turkmen students to study in CIS countries, or further afield, is probably the cheapest and most effective way of ensuring that at least some have access to adequate education. A broad-based international effort is needed to ensure that the policies introduced by President Niyazov do not result in a complete lack of educated young Turkmen.

There are major gaps in international programs for sports and leisure facilities. Sports infrastructure is best tackled on the local level, to avoid the almost inevitable corruption that creeps into major construction projects. Youth clubs and sports clubs should be important elements in local community programs.

Significant job creation for young people will only come through increased opportunity for private sector development in the region, which means the international community needs to remain committed to policy change at high levels in closed economies

such as those in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. But there is still scope to expand development and business programs at grass-roots level to include more young people.

Donors should not be under the illusion that change in this area is merely a matter of funding. The attitudes and abilities of young people are a critical political issue in the countries of Central Asia. Attempts to take new approaches to education, or provide more space for autonomous youth organisations to flourish will meet resistance from many government officials. Real change in this area will require high-level political engagement, and active support for those within the region who understand that the long-term future of Central Asia depends on creating much improved prospects for this new generation.

Osh/Brussels, 31 October 2003

APPENDIX A

MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA

