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Uyghur Villagers Forcibly Relocated to Make Way For Tourist Resorts

Chinese authorities have forcibly relocated more than half of the ethnic minority Uyghurs—mostly farmers and herders—from three mountain townships in the Xinjiang region to make way for tourist resorts without providing them adequate compensation or job opportunities, according to area sources.

Villagers from the three townships in Kumul (in Chinese, Hami) prefecture, in northwestern China's Xinjiang Autonomous Uyghur Region, told RFA's Uyghur Service that in addition to being stripped of their livelihoods, they fear losing their cultural traditions, as local officials resettle them to suburban neighborhoods.

Eysa Yehya, a 59-year-old resident of the On Ikki Tagh, or Twelve Mountains region of Kumul, said that around half of the population from the mountain townships of Tashbaliq (Bingqin), Tengritagh (Tianshan) and Gherbiy Tagh (Xishan) had already relocated to the outskirts of Kumul city.

He said more than 80 percent, or as many as 1,200 of the residents in his Tomurqi village and nearby Nernasu village in Tengritagh township had already signed agreements to be relocated, and that he was one of the few remaining holdouts.

"Most of the village has been moved or is in the process of moving," he said, adding that villagers were apprehensive about what life would be like in their new suburban resettlement.

"[The authorities] gave the farmers apartments around the city. We were told that they will give the elderly almost 300 yuan (U.S. \$50) a month of poverty subsistence allowance. Then the youths are going to be given janitorial jobs and other related work."

Yehya said that when he heard residents aged 60 years or older were only going to receive around 300 yuan from the government per month, he refused to sign an agreement to relocate, adding that he was the only one in Tomurqi to hold out.

"I think that after the villagers move to the city they will be on subsistence allowance support for the rest of their lives. They will have no choice," he said of the residents whose only livelihood has been farming and raising livestock.

"If the villagers are being moved like this, our village and heritage is going to vanish without a trace."

Yehya said that 99 percent, or as many as 700 of the residents of a third village in Tengritagh, called Aqtash, had already relocated and that the area had been turned into a resort providing a cool area for city residents to avoid the summer heat and ski slopes during the winter.

The surrounding grasslands in Aqtash are now occupied by government-supported Han Chinese companies, he said.

"Tumorqi village is in a mountainous region, so we have grasslands that can support 20,000 animals. As the villagers are moving, they are selling their livestock and the grasslands are being emptied," Yehya said.

"We have heard that the government is going to open tourist attractions here. The adjacent villages, such as in Gherbiy Tagh, have been completely relocated and Aqtash village is nearly moved ... Chinese companies are occupying the villages and they are setting up tourist resorts."

Holding out

According to villagers, the relocation project was initiated in the 1980s, but accelerated after 2000 to accommodate growing Kumul city. Now, they say, many villages in the three mountain townships are home to either half of their former populations or have been completely vacated.

Yehya, who has four children, said that new infrastructure has come to the area as companies set up shop, but that social services are disappearing as the residential community has picked up and left.

"We did not have electricity here in our village, we had solar panels. Now they have connected us to the electricity grid. We have heard that they will build roads as well," he said.

"Nevertheless, they closed the schools here. There are only 10 students left in this village, but they are going to be moved to the city as well."

Yehya maintains several mu (one-sixth acre) of land to grow oats and herd sheep, but he said that since his neighbors had left, it had become extremely difficult to make ends meet.

"I have four children. I cannot send them to school because I don't have enough money," he said.

"My youngest son was accepted into Xinjiang University, but I could not afford to send him there due to the high tuition and right now he has no livelihood."

Restive region

Kumul prefecture, located in eastern Xinjiang, is a crucial source of coal supplies for China. Around 10 percent of the residents are ethnic Kazakhs.

The On Ikki Tagh mountain region is the base from which Uyghurs have launched four major revolts against Chinese rule in the 20th century alone.

Uyghurs say they have long suffered ethnic discrimination and oppressive religious controls under Beijing's policies.

Xinjiang, which came under Chinese control following two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s, has seen a string of violent incidents in recent years as Beijing tightens security measures and extends house-to-house raids targeting Uyghur families.

Many Uyghurs refer to Xinjiang, which borders Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the former Soviet Central Asian republics, as East Turkestan.

Reported by Eset Sulaiman for RFA's Uyghur Service. Translated by Mamatjan Juma and Eset Sulaiman. Written in English by Joshua Lipos.

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