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The News in 2 minutes

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Putting Tajikistan on the map

By **Roxana Saberi**
Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Many Tajiks credit Emomali Rahmonov, re-elected to a third presidential term last week, with helping to bring peace to their war-torn country in the 1990's.



Cotton is one of Tajikistan's main exports

Now they expect more than stability - they want better jobs and higher wages.

But without domestic reforms and more international aid, international observers fear this central Asian country could face an economic crisis and return to instability again, threatening the security of the entire region.

"Unfortunately it's a country that is not on the map of most people in the West so many people ask us where Tajikistan is," said Igor Bosc, deputy resident representative at the United Nations Development Programme in Dushanbe.

"It's an important part of central Asia, and it's next to Afghanistan.

"It's in a region that's very rich in oil and gas, so I think there are reasons for international actors and donors to be interested in the stability of Tajikistan," he added.

Lack of investment

He thinks that poverty could also lead to radicalism in this mostly Muslim country.

Tajikistan's economy has improved in recent years, driven largely by high prices for the country's main exports - cotton and aluminium.



Although it lacks accessible oil and gas deposits, Tajikistan is trying to develop hydropower using its abundance of fresh water.

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The major investment it needs is taking time to materialize.

In the meantime, Tajikistan remains the poorest of the countries that used to make up the former Soviet Union.

The United Nations says 64% of the population lives on less than \$2.15 a day.

Marziye Jabborova and her husband fall into that category.

They each make \$10 a month cleaning the apartment complex where they live in one room with their five children.

"We can't afford a lot of things," Mrs Jabborova, 45, said.

"Three of our children go to school, and we need money for that - to buy books, supplies and so on.

"I can't buy new clothes for them so we just keep washing the one or two outfits they have, to at least keep them clean," she added.



President Rahmonov's needs to boost the Tajik economy

Mission to Moscow

Even Tajiks with white collar jobs are having a tough time.

Gulnaz Ortiqova also earns \$10 a month, even though she is a nurse.

"Finding work in Tajikistan is difficult, and if you work in just one place, you can't support your own family, you can't even support yourself," she said.

Fortunately for Mrs Ortiqova, however, her husband recently found a job in Moscow and now sends home around \$150 every month.

He is one of hundreds of thousands of Tajiks who seek higher wages abroad, especially in Russia.

Many of them are from Tajikistan's rural areas, where more than 70% of the country's roughly seven million people live, Mr Bosc said.

He believes that while the money the migrants send home helps families to survive, it is not enough to develop the rural economy.



The Jabborova family struggle to make ends meet

"It's just keeping the rural economy from dropping any lower than it is right now," he said.

"And we fear that the widening gap between rich and poor, rural and urban, can create social tensions in the future."

Tax collection

Mr Bosc believes proper land reform, as well as the development of civil society and health and education programmes, are needed to improve the economy.

The government should also work harder to fight corruption, reform taxes, and attract foreign investors, said an economist who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The government is not really trying to fight corruption.

"That's why it doesn't have much success in this fight.

"Tax collection is improving this year, but it still doesn't meet international standards."

But Doulatali Doulatov, the head of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, said Mr Rahmonov's government is taking many steps to strengthen the economy, including fighting corruption and creating jobs so Tajiks can work at home instead of abroad.

"The government has also been establishing energy reactors and we're helping to set up various industrial projects to increase Tajikistan's exports," he said.

"All of these things create the possibility for Tajikistan to be transformed into one of the strong economies of central Asia in the next two to three years."

Many Tajiks long for days gone by, when around \$1bn of aid a year from the rest of the Soviet Union helped sustain the economy.

Mobile phones

Today Tajikistan's gross domestic product has yet to recover to its pre-independence level.

Some economists say Tajikistan has been slow to implement reforms needed to transition from a command to a free-market economy.

The country is also landlocked, depending on long transport routes and thus good relations with its neighbours.



Bekhzod Fayzullaev is one of a new breed of Tajik entrepreneurs

Still, some Tajiks have learned how to succeed in business here.

Bekhzod Fayzullaev helped set up Babilon-Mobile telephone company in 2002.

It now has 800 employees and around 300,000 clients.

"In the past three years, we have gained 41% of the market, and we haven't sat still," he says.

Untouched

Some foreign companies - from Europe, the US, and the Middle East - are joining Russian ones that have been taking an interest in Tajikistan.

The flights from Tehran to Dushanbe are often filled with Iranian businessmen.

They share a common language with their Tajik counterparts, and in the evenings some enjoy the lively entertainment of Dushanbe not found in the Islamic Republic.

One Iranian businessman who preferred to remain unidentified sells Iranian goods in Tajikistan and has also opened a restaurant there.

"People ask me why I don't go and invest in Dubai instead," he said.

"I say it is because Tajikistan is untouched, and there's so much room for growth."

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