

Tajik Doctors Caught in the Civil War in Yemen



The couple at the Jeddah airport.

Hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrants, the majority of whom work in the Russian Federation, provide remittances to Tajikistan. Until mid-2015, there were also over one thousand Tajik migrants living and working in Yemen. Most were employed as medical workers. Following the escalation of the civil war in Yemen in March-April 2015, with air strikes, bombings, and heavy fighting erupting, these Tajik citizens were in desperate need of evacuation. One family, from Khorog in eastern Tajikistan, shared their story of being caught in such a frightening, life-threatening crisis far from home:

“My wife and I are both doctors. I am an anesthesiologist and my wife is an ultrasonographer. We have been in the profession for over twenty five years. We graduated from the Medical University in Dushanbe in Tajikistan and worked for many years in the Regional Hospital in Khorog, Tajikistan.

In 2004, with the help of some friends who lived in Moscow, we found positions in a private hospital in Aden, Yemen. We worked as doctors in the main city hospital. The

clinic paid us a good salary and we were able to save money to pay for our children's education. Yemen at that time was a peaceful country and having your family with you was not considered dangerous. There was a beautiful beach in the south of Aden and my family and I used to go to the seaside a lot. We learnt some of the local language and counted many Yemenis among our friends.

My wife and I never thought that one day Yemen would find itself in a conflict of such scale. We never believed that our neighbours would be killed or have to flee. However, bad news began to come in regularly that opposition forces were close to entering the city. We had many challenges since the conflict broke out in Aden; however, the most challenging time for us was when we had to flee the country. There were many other doctors from the ex-Soviet republics including Tajikistan. Up until the last moment, we were all in touch and kept each other informed about the situation in the country and a possible evacuation. We all thought that the conflict would never reach the scale that it did and that an agreement would be reached between the two sides.

Unfortunately, we were all mistaken. Worst of all, we misjudged that the conflict would suddenly turn into a full-scale war between the north and south of the country making us trapped. We simply could not move anywhere because people were shooting heavy guns all around us. The situation went from bad to worse as we lost touch with our friends and with our employers, the people who were responsible for our safety. We saw dead bodies lying in the street from the windows of our apartment. Some apartments in our neighborhood were hit by mortar shells. This was the point when we knew we had to leave. In the chaos international staff and people like us were practically left to manage on our own.

There was no Tajik Embassy in Yemen. The nearest embassy to us was in Saudi Arabia, but as Aden had lost telephone connectivity we lost touch with the embassy in Riyadh. By that time, the Russians had sent their warships to Aden to evacuate their citizens. We were informed two more ships would come for others soon. Ships were sent because the airport had been destroyed. We waited for a long time for the ships to come and take us to safety but they never reached us. The shelling near our house became too dangerous and we realized we could only rely on ourselves to get out of the country. We managed to find a bus which agreed to take people to the border with Saudi Arabia. On the way there, our bus had to stop numerous times because bullets were coming through the windows, forcing us to all lie down in the aisle. The poor bus driver had to change or repair the tires many times because they were riddled with bullet holes. All the men in the bus including myself helped the driver with repairs. Thankfully, our little son was not with us but at home in Tajikistan and didn't have to experience this nightmare.

We were not evacuated – we took our destiny into our own hands and made it out ourselves. We are grateful to God who kept us alive and helped us reach the Saudi Arabia border. We waited at the border for four days to get permission to enter. The Tajik

Embassy in Saudi Arabia became aware of our arrival and met us in Jeddah. They helped us a lot and we want to thank them. The next day we all left Saudi Arabia for Dubai, from where we flew back home to Tajikistan.”

Credit: IOM Tajikistan