

From North to South, OSCE field offices keep an ear to the ground



Garm Field Office, Rasht Valley, central Tajikistan

BY DMYTRO KONOPKO

The weekly staff meeting at the Centre in Dushanbe is over, and once again I am on my way back to my duty station in Garm, 185 km away. It's a four- to eight-hour drive, depending on the weather and the conditions along the Dushanbe-Jirgatal-Saritosh highway. Because the road serves as the main thoroughfare to Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, it is strategically important to Tajikistan. A Chinese company has committed itself to upgrading it, but progress is unbelievably slow, as I'm about to find out.

Having covered some 40 km, I brace myself for the rough ride on the unpaved section. My Nissan Patrol doesn't like it

one bit and starts groaning and bouncing madly, as if trying to shake my soul out of my body.

The Garm settlement is at the heart of the mountainous Rasht Valley northeast of Dushanbe. During the civil war, it was the scene of fierce fighting between Government and opposition forces. When the field office opened in 1998, staff had their work cut out for them: addressing the return of refugees and a whole range of post-conflict rehabilitation issues.

The terrain becomes more and more circuitous. I pass Rogun, the intended site of an ambitious hydropower project, and drive along the Vakhsh River, zigzagging between mountain serpentines. I see tiny settlements from time to time down below and across the river. I'm told that most of them can be reached only by taking a raft, and that some people earn their living by providing ferry services.

Negotiating the Kabu Jar section of the Dushanbe-Jirgatal-Saritosh highway can prove to be a real feat.

Photo: OSCE/Dmytro Konopko

I overtake heavy lorries enveloped in clouds of dust and black soot. These huge vehicles appear to be the only means right now of transporting goods and produce from Dushanbe. Although an airfield in Garm was upgraded for last year's festivities marking the anniversary of the signing of the Reconciliation Accord between the Government and the opposition in 1997, it remains practically unused, as hardly anyone can afford the price of air tickets.

Marshrutka minibuses, or literally, "fixed-route taxis", ply the Garm-Dushanbe route, but travelling in them can be a hair-raising experience: Most of the vehicles are jam-packed and poorly maintained, and it appears that the qualifications of some drivers are questionable.

I pass the formerly picturesque and now neglected Obigarm resort, famous for its thermal springs, and enter the Rasht Valley. Now I only have to negotiate Kabu Jar, a 4-km passage notorious for its frequent rock avalanches and landslides — caused in the winter by melting snow, and in the spring and autumn, by the rains. And then there



OSCE/ARMANDIS PUPOLS

The centre of Garm.

are the occasional earth tremors. A traveller can expect to be stuck here for several hours, waiting for road blockages to be cleared by bulldozers — which often don't have enough petrol.

It is springtime, and the Vakhsh River, where the Surkhob and the Hingob Rivers converge, is filled with stones that roll down the roaring red-coloured stream. However menacing, the sound has long been awaited by the Tajiks all winter long. It means that the land is finally being irrigated and that electricity is coming, bringing the local population back to active life after having endured a daily one-hour power supply for months on end.

I arrive in Garm just as the day is drawing to a close. Tomorrow, another trip lies ahead — this time to Jirgatol, a settlement on the Kyrgyz border, where the Centre in Dushanbe has been spearheading a project to stimulate entrepreneurial activity. This OSCE venture, however modest, promises to be a bright spot on the horizon in one of the country's most depressed regions.

But that's another story.

Dmytro Konopko started his assignment as Field Officer in Garm in April 2006. He is assisted by seven national staff. He is seconded from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, where he worked on arms control and disarmament, human resources, and consular matters. He has also served as a member of Ukraine's delegation to the OSCE and to the UN.



OSCE

Dmytro Konopko with assistant Jamilya Sharipova.



Students sweep Khujand's Botanical Garden on the occasion of Earth Day, 2007.

OSCE/DIMITRY PRUDTSKIY

Khujand Field Office, Sughd oblast, northern Tajikistan

BY GIORGIA A. VARISCO

8.30 a.m. It's only been two weeks since I arrived in Khujand, and here I am on a nice spring day, about to deliver a speech in front of hundreds of young students who are members of the "Green Patrol" movement. Today's event, a celebration of Earth Day, seeks to raise awareness about the environment and engage young people in the ecological conservation and preservation of their region.



Khujand's ancient mosque.

OSCE/GIORGIA A. VARISCO

The environment is a big issue here in the northern region of Sughd. The average citizen is still largely unaware of the negative long-term effects of living close to one of the many open-air radioactive waste dumps — a heritage of the Soviet Union. Food for thought: the total amount of radioactive waste in Tajikistan is close to 55 million tonnes, most of it deposited in the Ferghana Valley, of which Sughd is a part.

11 a.m. We meet the deputy governor of the Sughd region to discuss the local government's commitment to the OSCE-run crisis centre set up two years ago. As in many parts of the world, it's hard for battered and abused women here to escape from their plight and find refuge. Leaving one's husband and his family can mean being repudiated by the whole community. A crisis centre such as ours not only serves as a safe haven, it also provides professional legal and medical assistance, advice on women's rights and counselling for couples.

1 p.m. I have a relaxing lunch at the office with my colleagues, Shahlo, Nazokat and Suhrob. It's about the only chance we get to exchange views on global current events and the latest developments in the Ferghana Valley, in Tajikistan in general, and of course, in Italy.

The issue of a multi-party system as an indicator of a democratic society is raised. I was recently asked during an interview with a government newspaper if I thought that the country's multi-party

system met international democratic standards. I did not feel comfortable answering this sensitive question, but I did find it encouraging that this sort of topic *can* be brought up in the Tajik media.

5 p.m. Several university students come by our field office on their regular twice-monthly visits. It's an opportunity for us to interact with the younger segment of society. Today's topic: the new presidential decree banning miniskirts, the *hajib* (Muslim veil), parties and mobile phones in schools. The decree also limits jewellery worn in schools and universities to traditional adornments. Today's discussion was much more lively than usual. Some thought that the measures would actually help preserve Tajik traditions, while others believed that the new directives would cause a further disconnect between young people and the Government.

7 p.m. Finally I find some time to reply to e-mails. I look out the window and am treated to a typical Khujand red sunset. In the distance, the fading light casts a magical glow on the blue domes of the ancient mosque and *madrassa*.

Giorgia A. Varisco, an Italian national, has headed the Khujand Field Office since April 2007. She works with seven national staff. A former programme manager at UNDP and UNAIDS, she has managed, monitored and co-ordinated programmes dealing with anti-corruption, human rights, gender and community mobilization in Kyrgyzstan, Romania, Ukraine, Italy and South Africa.



Donkeys along the road to Danghara on a May day.

OSCE/WILLIAM PRYOR

Kulyab Field Office, Khatlon oblast, southern Tajikistan

BY WILLIAM PRYOR

7.00 a.m. Unwashed again. Along with the other 80,000 people in Kulyab, we've been without running water for a couple of days. I'm hoping our expected visitors from the Media Unit in Dushanbe won't notice.

We have tea and *non* (flatbread) for breakfast, during which we discuss — not for the first time — the vexed issue of women and bicycles. While we're glad to have a four-wheel-drive vehicle for getting

about in the mountainous regions bordering Afghanistan, I was planning to get some bicycles for the use of field staff in town. The idea seems to have run aground on the thorny issue of Ramziya, a female Pamiri colleague, riding around on a bicycle, which would be quite unusual for this region. “It’s fine, I suppose,” says someone in the male contingent, “but if it were my daughter, I’d forbid it.”

10.15 a.m. Ramziya has left to visit the local labour migrants’ information centre to follow up on a monitoring request from our Economic Unit in Dushanbe. We’ve been working with the International Organization for Migration and supporting several of these centres since 2006, helping to ensure that the thousands of Tajiks heading to Russia to work do so with a clear idea of what their rights and responsibilities are once they’re there. We agree we need to do more to encourage potential labour migrants to call at the local centre.

Meantime, our office assistant, Bahodur, has been helping me handle a call from an elderly man whose son appears to have gone to Ekaterinburg in southern Russia for work — only to go missing. He’s heard that his son may be in trouble with the police, but doesn’t know how to go about finding out more. I refer him to the Foreign Ministry and make a couple of calls to contacts in Ekaterinburg. (I subsequently discover that the son is indeed in pre-trial detention on charges of possession of drugs — a sobering reminder of the importance of the labour migrants’ information centre.)

12.30 p.m. The team from the Media Unit arrives for a meeting with local journalists. Some of the difficulties the latter face seem intractable: The vast majority of people in the region are lucky to get more than a couple of hours’ electricity a day during the winter months, so neither radio nor television is effective down here. The OSCE has been working with the local newspaper, *Kulyabskaya pravda*, for a couple of years now, helping to fill the information vacuum. I join them for a discussion of possible strategies for the longer-term sustainability of this enterprise.

3 p.m. With a visit by the High Commissioner on National Minorities imminent, we’ve just hosted a meeting with representatives of the region’s ethnic groups. They reckon that Tajiks make up more than 90 per cent of Kulyab’s population. Kulyab used to be home to a Russian majority, but now Uzbeks, Tatars and Afghans all outnumber the 300 or so Russians.



Some of these national minorities report difficulties getting hold of textbooks in their own language. However, it seems that for most, economic woes loom larger. This confirms the view of the deputy mayor, under whose remit the issue falls: In a meeting earlier this week, she described a largely homogeneous and harmonious community. This community may be united in poverty for now, but I suspect we need to find ways to ensure that future prosperity does not open up divisions.

8 p.m. *Plov* for dinner, along with the first salad of spring. And more *non*. Avoiding the bicycle issue, we fall enthusiastically into an argument about polygamy. Suddenly I’m no longer the liberal at the table — until we touch on the issue of polyandry. Some male colleagues choke on their tea at the idea of women having more than one partner. I’m saved by the bell — a welcome call from the Centre in Dushanbe. I’m to expect a delivery of fuel at some point later tonight.

With the arrival of spring and the flowering of the cherry and persimmon trees in the garden, I’ve almost forgotten the incessant cold of the winter months — though we still rely a lot on the generator. Without it, I’d be writing this by candlelight and filing it on donkeyback.

Bahodur Nazirov (left) of the Kulyab Field Office with Rustam Odinaev, Editor of *Kulyabskaya pravda*, an independent publication.

William Pryor, Field Officer in Kulyab since October 2006, heads an eight-person team. A former human rights adviser to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, he has worked on a wide range of public sector reform projects, particularly in the area of criminal justice, in the UK, in Russia and in several countries of the former Soviet Union.

