

Gulnaz Guliyeva

Azerbaijan's Fake Invalids

A lucrative business in false disability benefits is on the rise.

By Gulnaz Guliyeva and Rufat Abasov in Barda (CRS No. 246, 11-Aug-04)

A colourful advertisement on a dusty path in the refugee camp in Barda, central Azerbaijan, attracts customers to the repair shop of 21-year-old Asif Ibrahimov. Confined to a wheelchair, Asif skilfully mends shoes and sharpens knives.

Asif has been disabled from birth, but works to earn a living. Meanwhile, in the same camp there are perfectly healthy young men doing no work and receiving the state benefit due to invalids, on the basis of fake documents.

When it comes to disability benefits, such anomalies are common in Azerbaijan.

Although the ceasefire halting the war in Nagorny Karabakh was signed more than a decade ago, the number of disabled people in Azerbaijan has doubled since then. A non-governmental organisation, the Lotos Disability Awareness and Learning Centre, estimates there are 320,000 disabled people in an overall population of around eight million.

A report published last month by the Aran relief agency with the support of the British-based charity Oxfam estimated that 61 per cent of those who were registered as disabled in the last decade were actually able-bodied.

Kamil Aliev, information coordinator for the Aran relief agency told IWPR that high unemployment in the regions was driving people into concocting false disability certificate as an alternative source of income. The practice is particularly rife amongst internal displaced persons, IDPs, where unemployment is more than 80 per cent.

The disability certificates are handed out by the Medical Labour Expert Commission, MLEC, of Azerbaijan's social protection and labour ministry. Suspicion was aroused by the unusually high number – 84 per cent of the total – of disabled belonging to what is defined as the "second group", whose condition is less easy to diagnose.

"Most of the pseudo-disabled have a diagnosis of 'internal diseases' and if you ask them what the diagnosis is, they won't even be able to tell you," said Nizami Gahramanov, information officer for Aran. "On the other hand, the MLEC specially identifies a disease that can be cured over time, so in any case the corrupt commission will be proved right."

The level of disability benefits for "second group disabled" (90,000 manats or 18 dollars a month) is not much lower than that paid to the more seriously affected first group (100,000 manats or 18 dollars).

To get this valuable document, bribes are paid of up to two million manats or 400 dollars.

Sakit was wounded in the Nagorny Karabakh war, and for the last five years has lived on disability benefit of 100,000 manats a month. He said that his wife was also registered as a "second group invalid".

Asked what the problem was, he said "I do not remember what it is in medical language. It is some internal disease." He confessed that he paid up to 500,000 manats for her status, saying, "if you have money, you can get disability without any problem."

Aran's research suggests that every month, the Azerbaijani state budget loses up to three million dollars from disability scams.

"The MLEC system is very profitable for the people who run it, and that is why it is so closed to the public," a ministry official who asked not to be named told IWPR. "It is like a ministry inside a ministry, and reports directly to the first deputy minister of labour and the minister himself."

The official said that there had been a particularly sharp rise in the issue of false documents to young men seeking to avoid military service. When they are older and the threat has passed, "they suddenly become healthy again", he said.

"The MLEC system needs radical reform. It is so bogged down in corruption that situation can be changed only if fundamental reforms are carried out."

Perhaps the worst aspect of the situation is that thousands of real disabled people cannot afford to get their disability certified.

Zuleyha, a 27-year-old refugee from Agdam district, was born physically handicapped, but the documents attesting to her condition were lost by the hospital.

"My physical handicap is visible - one of my legs is shorter than the other," she said, wiping away tears. "I am disabled forever, because the doctors are unable to cure me.

"I can't get the benefit due to me, while healthy guys get it without any problem. They asked me for a bribe of two million manats to receive a certificate. Where can I get that kind of money?"

The attractions of a disability certificate become obvious when compared with what refugees can earn by manual labour. Many people are saving up to be able to afford the bribes.

"From early morning to late at night, I harvest onion and other vegetables under baking sun to earn between 5,000 and 10,000 manats a day," said Sakina, aged 60. "Perhaps, it would be better to borrow money and buy a disability certificate. In that case, we could receive permanent welfare every month."

The head of the MLEC, Telman Kazimov, categorically refused to give a full interview to IWPR, and speaking by telephone, would say only that, "there are no false disabled persons in Azerbaijan." He added, "The situation with disabled persons in Azerbaijan is OK, and the government pays close attention to them. As for the allegation that we allegedly give out false disability certificates, that is a lie."

Kazimov refused to give the number of registered invalids, saying, "it is a state secret".

The real invalid, Asif Ibrahimov, has reason to be grateful that he has been forced to learn to support himself. Pointing out the onions and potatoes lying on the floor, Asif's mother Ilduza Ibrahimova said some customers did not have the cash to pay for his work, and instead paid him in kind with what they had. In addition to his welfare payment of 20 dollars, he earns to 15 dollars from his little shop.

"God grant health to everybody who gave my son release from his own prison," his mother said. "Even though his income is not high, it's good that he is doing something."

Gulnaz Guliyeva works for "Caspian Business News" newspaper in Baku and Rufat Abbasov for Reuters news agency.