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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Impoverished Tajiks Pay Big for Holiday

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People carrying a Tajik flag stretching more than two kilometers and weighing 860 kilograms Friday in Dushanbe. **Nozim Kalandrov**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Impoverished Tajikistan on Friday celebrated its second decade of independence after the Soviet collapse in a costly show of pomp that has drawn criticism over the barely affordable expense.

More than 10,000 soldiers paraded on Friday through a central square in Dushanbe, ahead of a festive performance by 20,000 students.

The highlight of the day was the unfurling of a national flag stretching more than two kilometers and weighing 860 kilograms. That comes only weeks after the country unveiled the world's tallest unsupported flagpole, soaring 165 meters and which manufacturers said cost $3.5 million to create.

That is only the tip of the iceberg in the bonanza of construction that has changed the face of the nation's capital over recent months.

Finance Minister Safarali Nadzhmiddinov said more than $210 million has been spent

on erecting a host of new buildings and facilities in time for the anniversary. That is equivalent to more than one-tenth of Tajikistan's annual budget.

Earlier this month, President Emomali Rakhmon inaugurated the 20-story Dushanbe Plaza business center, which has become the city's tallest building and cost $33 million in state funds to complete.

Creating a 15-hectare city park set the authorities back another $16.8 million.

Other facilities completed ahead of the anniversary include a five-star hotel, an energy-saving light bulb factory and an open-air theater.

The World Bank estimates that about half of the nation's 7.5 million population lives below the poverty line and that average monthly salaries stand at less than $100. That hardship forces about half of the male working-age population to travel abroad for employment.

Government opponents face constant harassment from the authorities, so criticism of longtime President Rakhmon's leadership is relatively muted.

Even so, political analyst Parviz Mullodzhanov said the state seems to be shying away from specifying exactly how much money has been spent on Friday's festivities for fear of deepening discontent.

"They do not want to excessively annoy the people, most of whom live in extreme poverty," he said.

The scale of the independence festivities also belies the degree to which Tajikistan's government relies on international assistance for its economic survival.

The International Monetary Fund in May approved a new loan worth almost $21 million to help the cash-strapped country overcome difficulties created by the global financial crisis. That would take the fund's loans to Tajikistan under an existing credit arrangement to $125 million.

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