The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sochi Authorities Begin Raids to Find Illegal Migrants

By Ezekiel Pfeifer

September 10, 2013



Passport control at the port in St. Petersburg. **Yekaterina Kuzmina**

Migration authorities in Sochi on Tuesday kicked off a campaign to catch migrants working in the country illegally in an effort to rid the city of all illegal migrants before next year's Winter Olympics.

Construction companies in Sochi are employing tens of thousands of low-wage workers as they rush to finish an array of projects in Sochi ahead of the Winter Games set for Feb. 7-23. Human rights groups have criticized what they say is the often poor treatment of the workers, many of whom are thought to be in the country illegally.

The first raid on Tuesday targeted a skyscraper currently under construction in Sochi, with migration service officers going to the building's 20th floor to check workers' documents, the local Rossia television affiliate reported. All the workers' papers were found to be in order.

The migration service officers said it was possible that the workers had been warned in advance of the impending raid.

A second raid, among workers building an underpass, uncovered two Armenians without proper migration papers. The building contractor for the project, Tonneldorstroi, faces a fine of 250,000 to 800,000 rubles ($7,600 to $24,300) for having allegedly hired the two men.

The raids by the migration service will continue in the city daily, the television report said.

In total, the service plans to check 100,000 enterprises, including both public and private entities, Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported Tuesday. To carry out all the raids, law enforcement personnel have been brought in to the city from surrounding regions.

According to the group Human Rights Watch (HRW), many of the workers helping to build infrastructure and Olympic facilities in Sochi have faced exploitation and miserable conditions. Workers interviewed by the group complained of having to work 12-hour shifts with few days off, confiscated passports, and unpaid wages.

Companies completing projects for the Sochi Games have denied mistreating their workers.

In a report released in February, HRW estimated that of the tens of thousands of workers employed in Sochi, more than 16,000 are from outside Russia.

Russia has seen a rise in anti-migrant sentiment in recent months, and immigration has become one of the most politically charged issues in the country. In a poll conducted last month by employment website Superjob.ru, just 6 percent of those surveyed said they thought migrant workers represented a boon for the Russian economy, compared to 17 percent in 2007.

According to that same poll, 52 percent of people surveyed said they thought immigrants contributed to an increase in levels of crime and corruption, while 34 percent of those polled in 2007 expressed that opinion.

The survey was conducted in all regions of Russia from Aug. 22 to 25, with the participation of 1,800 "economically active" people over the age of 18.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/10/sochi-authorities-begin-raids-to-find-illegal-migrants-a27560