

# What Happened in Mongolia to Cause this Crisis?

Extract from an article in the *Independent*, December 2003:

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**More than 3,000 children live on the streets of Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Outer Mongolia, where temperatures can fall as low as -52C. They have been forced out of their family homes by poverty, violent parents or sheer hunger.**

They beg, steal, dig through piles of rubbish or wander ice-covered streets to find the wherewithal to survive the perishing winter.

The crisis of children on the streets was prompted by the collapse of Communism, which sent the economy of the former Soviet republic into deep crisis. Most Mongolian factories shut and as much as a third of the 2.4 million population descended swiftly into poverty, with a further 50 per cent living on the brink of subsistence. The former centralised social welfare system was unable to cope.

But that was not all. The land is prone to a natural disaster known as the dzud, when sheeted ice formed by melted and frozen snow prevents animals from grazing on dried grass in winter. It has struck the country for the past three years, wiping out as many 3.9 million of the nation's 33 million animals, and leaving hundreds of nomadic herder families without any means of subsistence.

This, combined with the sheer pace of social and economic change, has left thousands of former factory workers and herders bewildered. The result has been escalating domestic violence, crime, alcoholism and children driven out onto the freezing streets.

Children, along with old people and women, have borne the brunt of the social collapse. Thousands of children moved on to the streets of the capital in search of the food and clothing their desperate parents were simply unable to provide. Bolormaa Nordov, the head of the Mongolian National Child Rights Centre, says: "The social changes of the Nineties took the government and children's organisations by surprise. We did not know how to tackle the problem of street children, nor did we have enough resources."

Estimates put the numbers of street children in Outer Mongolia from 3,700 to 4,000, some as young as five.

The problem has been made worse in the past three years by the rapid movement of nomadic herders hit by the dzud into the capital and other large towns. The migration, which the UN has called "a silent crisis" for children, escalated from an average 10,000 each year during 1992-97 to a record high of 25,000 in 2002. Total population of the capital has soared from 600,000 to one million.

Many of those who move in do not have official registration or a place to live or work. Children of migrant families are hence a particularly vulnerable group because they do not have the necessary documents to enrol in school or get medical services so they often have to fend for themselves. □