

Hundreds killed and wounded in ethnic pogroms in Kyrgyzstan

Unrest destabilizes Central Asian region

By Barry Grey
15 June 2010

Mobs of ethnic Kyrgyz continued to attack ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan for the fourth consecutive day on Monday, bringing the government's official casualty toll to 124 killed and 1,685 wounded.

Unofficial estimates place the number of dead as high as 1,000 and the wounded in the many thousands. The *New York Times* reported Monday that Pierre-Emmanuel Ducruet, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said inspections of morgues "suggested that more than 700 people had been killed in Osh alone, and that 'not less than 3,000' people were in need of medical help, mostly for gunshot wounds."



Tens of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks have flooded from the major towns of Osh and Jalalabad and their surrounding villages across the border into Uzbekistan, seeking refuge.

The Uzbek government says some 75,000 ethnic Uzbeks have fled from Kyrgyzstan—about 10 percent of the Uzbek population of the country. Refugee camps have sprung up on the Uzbek side of the border where, according to Red Cross spokesmen, conditions are horrific. There are reports of dysentery among refugee children.

There are also thousands of refugees struggling to get across the border, which the Uzbek government ordered closed Monday.

The center of the attacks reportedly shifted from Osh to Jalalabad on Sunday and Monday. Fighting reportedly broke

out Thursday night in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, with a population of about 225,000.

Initially, it seems, both ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were victims of violence, but the fighting quickly turned into a wave of mob assaults on Uzbek neighborhoods. Entire Uzbek areas have been torched, according to reports, and those ethnic Uzbeks remaining have barricaded themselves in their homes.

While the violence receded in Osh on Sunday, arson and shooting of Uzbeks were reportedly increasing in Jalalabad on Monday.

The interim government headed by President Rosa Otunbayeva has been unable to restore order in the south. Police, security forces and troops were ordered to the region Friday, but they failed to curtail the attackers. Some Uzbeks reported that government forces aided the gangs that attacked their homes and businesses.

In a desperate bid to restore order and save her government, Otunbayeva on Saturday requested that Russia send in peacekeeping troops. That request intensified tensions in the region and between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev rejected the request, at least for the present, but he did dispatch an additional 300 paratroopers to fortify the Russian military base near the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.

An emergency meeting of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on Monday likewise refused to send troops, instead agreeing to send the embattled government in Bishkek military equipment and road transport. The CSTO consists of Russia and former Soviet republics Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The US State Department on Monday called for a coordinated international response, involving the US, Russia, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Washington does not want to see a unilateral Russian intervention, which would

dramatically shift the balance of influence over Kyrgyzstan and potentially threaten the US air base outside of Bishkek.

Uzbeks make up 15 percent of the 5.5 million population of Kyrgyzstan, but in the southern regions that border Uzbekistan they are almost as numerous as the Kyrgyz.

The eruption of violence is the result of immense economic hardship and poverty, decades of corrupt and repressive governments, and a festering political crisis. All of these factors have been compounded by the destabilizing impact of the US war and occupation of Afghanistan, for which the Manas air base serves as a central hub for the movement of US and NATO troops and supplies.

The US has been seeking to increase its military/intelligence presence in Kyrgyzstan. Last month the Pentagon put out bids for companies to help construct an anti-terrorism training center in Osh.

China also has a huge interest in the fate of Kyrgyzstan, with which it shares an extended border. The Chinese have been expanding their trade with the country in recent years.

The disintegration of Kyrgyzstan could fuel ethnic tensions and separatist tendencies inside both Russia and China, as well as within the neighboring former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.

Russia and the US, in particular, have been vying for dominance over Kyrgyzstan, especially since the US established the Manas base in the former Soviet Republic at the start of the Afghan war in 2001. The fall of the Kyrgyz government and breakup of the country could precipitate a major crisis between the two powers.

Zharikhin Vladimir, deputy director of the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences, warned that the unrest would reverberate beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders. "These events will have a negative influence on the stability of the region," he said, adding, "The likelihood that Kyrgyzstan will disintegrate has grown considerably. South Kyrgyzstan borders Uzbekistan and the border of Afghanistan is nearby. The region is a knot of nerves for the whole of Central Asia."

The eruption of ethnic violence occurs barely two months after the overthrow of the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, following mass protests in Bishkek against government corruption and a sharp rise in utility rates. Bakiyev was succeeded by the interim government headed by Otunbayeva.

The interim government has never fully consolidated control of the south of the country, a stronghold of ousted President Bakiyev. In that region, including Osh and Jalalabad, most Kyrgyz reportedly continue to support Bakiyev, while most Uzbeks support the new government.

Otunbayeva heads a fragile and fractious coalition that lacks deep-going popular support. She and her cohorts came

to power April 7 promising to usher in a new period of democracy and progress. However, she is a longtime political operative, having served in the 1990s as ambassador to both the US and Britain in the despotic regime of Askar Akayev, and then backed Bakiyev in the so-called "Tulip Revolution" of 2005 which overthrew Akayev.

Her coalition partners are similarly veterans of the previous corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

The interim government, which initially promised to hold elections in October, has put them back to the end of 2011. It has called a national referendum for June 27 to endorse Otunbayeva's presidency until then and to adopt a new constitution.

Otunbayeva accuses Bakiyev, who is in exile in Belarus, of instigating the rioting in the south in order to block the referendum and topple her government. The deposed president denies the charge, but his family members and supporters have reportedly been active in leading attacks on ethnic Uzbeks since last Thursday.

Last month, ethnic fighting erupted, on a far smaller scale, in Jalalabad, Bakiyev's home region. Two were killed and dozens wounded when ethnic Kyrgyz attacked a private university attended mostly by Uzbeks. Days earlier, Bakiyev supporters had seized government buildings in Osh and Jalalabad, expelling local leaders loyal to the interim government before being overrun by government forces.

The tragic events in Kyrgyzstan are a product both of the US colonial aggression in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was engineered by the Stalinist bureaucracy itself with the support of Western imperialism.

In the dying days of the USSR, as nationalist elements within the Stalinist apparatus in Kyrgyzstan were preparing to break away and establish independence (which came in 1991), ethnic violence erupted in Osh. Hundreds were killed until order was restored by Soviet troops.

The breakup of the Soviet Union and capitalist restoration have produced an unmitigated disaster in Kyrgyzstan. The economy of the former Soviet republic, which had exported 98 percent of its goods to the rest of the USSR, collapsed. Kyrgyzstan is now desperately poor, having a gross domestic product one-ninth that of Kazakhstan. The average daily wage for those fortunate enough to have a job is \$5.

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