

Dushanbe Finally Backs US Campaign

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Tajikistan leaves it late to announce its support for US-led strikes against the Taleban

After a long silence following America's declaration of war on terrorism, Tajikistan has finally declared its hand, saying it will assist President Bush's anti-terrorist military operations in Afghanistan and let the US air force use its airspace and airports.

The Tajik statement, issued earlier this week, was a milestone. Until then, the leadership limited itself to vague expressions of willingness to cooperate with the US in the struggle against terrorism, without spelling out what form that cooperation might take. Curiously, the information was leaked to the media through a Japanese diplomat following his talks with President Emomali Rakhmonov in Dushanbe on October 8, the second day of US air strikes against Afghanistan.

It was Tokyo's envoy who first broke the news that Tajikistan had agreed to put its airspace and airports at Washington's disposal. The Dushanbe government statement followed hours later.

Tajikistan probably delayed declaring its support for America out of fears of a hostile reaction from Afghanistan, with which it has a 1500 km border. The Taleban regime in Kabul has threatened to take reprisals against countries backing the US assault.

Tajikistan went through a disastrous civil war between a Russian-backed government and Islamic insurgents from 1992 to 1997, which left its defences shattered. It was only after the US military campaign started in earnest that Dushanbe felt bold enough to express its opinions openly.

The authorities remain anxious that the Taleban may act on its threats. At a press conference in Dushanbe on October 9, the chief of the country's security council, Amirkul Azimov, skirted questions about how Tajikistan's airports and bases would actually be used.

Instead, he insisted the priority was humanitarian action, even though the government's statement clearly referred to military operations.

"The issue of ground troops moving into Afghanistan through Tajikistan's territory was not raised and is not being discussed," he said. Azimov confirmed American military experts were currently in Tajikistan, but suggested they were engaged exclusively in organising humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

Apart from the Taleban's threats, anxiety over arousing hostile Islamic opinion at home may have encouraged the Tajik government to conceal its position until the last minute.

Tajikistan is a secular state but Muslims make up 95 per cent of the population and Islamic influence is stronger there than in the other Central Asian states, a factor that helps explain the duration of the civil war between the government and the Islamist rebels.

Those feelings of disquiet were articulated immediately after the first US strikes by Said Abdullo Nuri, the former leader of the Tajik rebels, who now heads the Party of Islamic Revival of Tajikistan.

"If strikes are carried out against ordinary Afghans as well as terrorists, this will look more like American aggression against Afghanistan," he said. "I do not rule out that unrest among the Muslim believers may occur in Tajikistan." However, he was careful to distance himself from the suggestion that Tajikistan's Muslims backed the Taleban's religious war, or jihad, against the West. "We know the canons of Islam and Sharia very well and we ourselves know when and under what conditions jihad can be declared," he said. "Osama bin Laden does not have a right to declare a jihad."

After almost universal condemnation of the Taleban by the international community, Tajik Islamists do not want to court the world's fury by placing themselves on the same side of the barricades as the Afghan extremists.

That does not mean they have no private sympathy for the Taleban, which supported them during the civil war in Tajikistan.

Nuri dodged commenting directly on whether US was justified in bombing Afghanistan and merely said such actions ought to be carried out only under the auspices of the UN and other international organisations, such as the OSCE and the Islamic Conference.

The world needed to be 100 per cent certain that terrorist units in Afghanistan were responsible for the tragedy in the US before acting, he added.

Tajikistan's hesitant stand towards the Taleban contrasts with the far more self-confident approach of neighbouring Uzbekistan, which has a big army - and no long border with Afghanistan.

Tashkent was one of the first governments in the region to offer its airspace and airports for the US, and American military aircraft have already landed at Uzbek airports.

Turkmenistan, which has a border with Afghanistan, earlier offered assistance to the US, but only in the form of humanitarian aid.

Central Asian states are still struggling to reach a common position on the Afghan conflict. This week, security chiefs of several of them attended a session of member countries of the Collective Security Agreement. This body groups Russia, the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan, alongside Armenia in the Caucasus and Belarus.

Vladimir Rushailo, head of Russia's security council, said at the end of the summit that CSA countries would hold to a common line on cooperation with the US and provision of support to the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance. Further coordination with America in the fight against terrorism, he said, remained subject to negotiation.

Tajikistan, meanwhile, has hosted several meetings of top officials from the Commonwealth of Independent States, which includes most of the old Soviet republics, a fact that reflects this small vulnerable country's strategic position, straddling the front line between the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

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