

Eyewitness - Defending The White House

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How an IWPR contributor reporting on the dramatic storming of the Kyrgyz government found himself protecting the lives and property of those inside.

This is how it all started: on March 23, I went with my colleague Azamat Kalman to a demonstration by non-government organisations, NGOs, that was going on near the Salieva monument in downtown Bishkek.

When the police moved in, Azamat, who's head of an independent trade union of journalists, got beaten up and was thrown down the steps of a street underpass, which left him with two broken legs.

The next day – March 24 - I was going by car to visit him in hospital, taking a route via the Osh market. But the car came to a halt near the Leninsky district administration building: there were people gathering outside it, preparing to march towards the government building, known as the White House.

I started worrying because my mother works at that district office. They wouldn't let me into the building – but they did tell me she had gone off to the White House. I set off there forthwith, arriving there in time to witness all the trouble.

After the people had entered the government premises, I followed after them. A bit later, the main entrance door was broken in, and people entered the building itself.

Some 10-15 minutes after this, the crowd brought out Bolot Januzakov, who is deputy head of the presidential administration. They started beating him really violently and mercilessly. They punched him in the face, he fell down and they started kicking him.

A few other guys and I immediately formed a shield round Januzakov, picked him up under the arms and dragged him back inside the building because his life was at risk outside. We went into a small lobby near the entrance, because the crowd was still trying to get him. We broke a narrow side window and escaped further inside the building. Another guy and I carried Januzakov – now unconscious – by the arms and another lad was fending off the crowd.

We put him in some dark room, locked the door and sat down inside. One of us checked Januzakov's pulse and we realised he needed to go to hospital immediately. We took off his jacket and wrapped it round his head so no one would recognise him.

Our lookout said that the west entrance was less crowded, so we got Januzakov out that way. When people asked who we were carrying, we said he was one of ours who'd got injured.

We carried him past the security checkpoint booth and on towards the Rossia Cinema. There were special police units and also some members of the new parliament standing there. We approached them and asked them to call an ambulance, but no one reacted so one of us had to run and call one. It arrived in five or ten minutes, they checked him over and said he'd live.

I was told later that people chased after the National Guard commander Abdygul Chotbaev with sticks; there were rumours that they attempted to beat up foreign minister Askar Aitmatov. I think that was a bad

precedent.

I had the impression that the opposition did not have the intention of seizing the White House - it was spontaneous. It all started when the demonstrators were stoned by provocateurs wearing distinctive white caps. Many people said these were thugs working for Akaev supporters, but there were many former policemen among them too - I recognised them as I once worked in the police.

The police themselves provoked and goaded the demonstrators. After that the people grabbed the police's batons from them and started tearing up the paving stones and throwing rocks.

After getting Januzakov into the ambulance, I went back to the White House. At this point the people were attempting to get organised and set up some sort of people's militia. They were trying to cordon off the entrances.

I went into the building behind two leading public figures, Tabyldy Egemberdiev and Dooronbek Sadyrbaev, who were urging people to leave the building. Together, we decided to block the doors and start getting people out since there was already looting going on.

With several other guys, I went up to the seventh floor, where the presidential administration is located, and blocked the elevators and doors. We started slowly ejecting the looters. We couldn't actually force them out, we had to cut off the corridors and stop others getting in.

The looting was full-on: office equipment was being vandalised, TV sets were thrown out of windows, while others struggled to carry stuff away.

Almost all the offices were damaged, except that part of the seventh floor where the president's cabinet and the conference hall are located. There was a lot of damage to the rooms of the prime minister and his deputies, the head of the presidential administration, and presidential advisor Askar Kakeev.

There was paper everywhere, doors were broken in, people were on the rampage in search of valuables. Everything was being carted off, from irons to computers. Old shoes and trousers were lying around everywhere, as people got changed on the spot, exchanged their worn clothes for whatever they found in the offices. There was someone running around with a stack of porn magazines he'd found in the cupboards of high-ranking officials.

Whenever they came across vodka, people got so drunk they collapsed on the floor. Others were eating and drinking in the buffet.

I went along to the president's reception room, where some people were already trying to resist the looters. They were managing to protect the presidential office, more or less. In the side room where the bodyguards usually sit, there were three young members of staff in uniform, two men and a woman. They were scared, especially the woman, and we told them to call home to get civilian clothes brought in for them. We got them out of the building, together with other staffers that we came across.

The president's secretary was in a state of shock, demanding to get her mobile phone back after someone had taken it off her. In addition to being Askar Akaev's secretary, people in the know said she also was a lieutenant-colonel in the National Security Service. We got her out through a ground-floor window.

Back in Akaev's office, we decided to organise a militia to protect against looting. We barricaded the entrances and started ejecting the marauders.

These were mainly youngsters, many teenagers of about 15. As far as I could see, they were mostly from outside the capital; very few were from Bishkek itself.

Getting them out took about four hours: we'd think we had all the entry points covered, but they kept popping up again from somewhere else – maybe the ventilation shafts. In the prime minister's office I discovered a lift that they were using to get inside, so we blocked that off too.

We ourselves were under siege and couldn't go out. The seventh and sixth floor were under guard, the fifth was in the hands of the looters, while the fourth floor was reportedly protected. So it was like a sandwich, each floor doing its own thing.

From the windows, we watched the crowds of looters smashing windows.

We spent the entire night like that.

The water had been turned off when the White House was stormed because the first floor got flooded, so we didn't have any water and had to search the cupboards for water and tea. In the evening, they brought in some water.

I was to leave the White House only on the evening of the following day.

That first night, we had a look round. The half of the seventh floor where the presidential apartments and conference hall are located was OK.

We let hardly anyone go into the president's office. Anyone who did go in wanted to sit in the president's chair just for five seconds. That's probably a really Kyrgyz thing to do.

Some people took watches and pens as souvenir's from the president's office – even disposable razors were handed round.

We kept telling them they mustn't take things, but they all tried to get something as a memento.

We didn't clash with the looters. No one confiscated the things they were carrying off. In fact, no one would have dared to, as they had a scary look in their eyes – they looked like zombies.

Young people of 15 to 18 took computers apart and made off with the hard disks and RAM sticks. One of my colleagues said she bought a ventilator fan worth 2000 soms, or 50 US dollars, for just 80 soms.

The seventh floor actually had very out-of-date office equipment, of a kind rarely seen in any decent office nowadays. I was very surprised that the president's cabinet and the whole of the seventh floor were extremely ascetic, kind of dowdy. The parquet and doors were styles from the Eighties, and the fittings the usual post-Soviet stuff.

Deputy prime minister Kubanychbek Jumaliev had the best furniture. By contrast, Akaev's office had walls panelled in a cheap veneer wood; it hadn't seen a renovation for a long time. There were carpet runners dating back to the last years in power of Turdakun Usubaliev, the Soviet-era Communist leader. None of the looters fancied pinching them.

Near the waiting-room to Akaev's office, there was a small room like a museum. That used to be where they stored gifts ranging from jewelry to books. But there was nothing left, just three packets of holy earth from the tomb of the ancient Manas.

In Akaev's office there were books given as presents that looked like no one had ever opened them, as the pages were stuck together. In the bookcases there were books written by Akaev, his wife and his daughter.

Prime Minister Nikolai Tanaev's office had 56 volumes of Lenin and a full collection of Marx and Engels. It also had lots of alcohol, mostly cognac and Sary Ozon vodka.

State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov had an excellent collection of books. We leafed through them - very good taste, I even started to have some respect for him after that. Many of the books had been annotated.

The defenders found about 800 firearms in the basement, and spent the whole night waiting for the National Security Service to arrive and take the weapons away, which they did only the following day.

We got scared when people rushed in again the next day, attempting to storm the White House a second time. We observed from above how the crowd was being directed by adult men who looked like Bishkek residents. We barricaded the entrances again. The looters got as far as the fourth floor, vandalising and taking away whatever was left. After seeing there was nothing else to steal, they went back.

There were about 25 of us defenders of the White House.

At the start, we all stuck together and no one set himself above the rest. But leaders gradually started emerging - some started proposing new "initiatives". It all looked like an attempt to get something, to be noticed or to associate oneself with the new authorities.

One guy turned up and said he'd opened an information point on the sixth floor. I went down and found there was nothing except one telephone. They started producing press releases, some started shouting at the others and demanding obedience.

At that point I decided it was time to go home to my wife and daughter. For me, the defence of the White House was over.

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