

IMU Offensive Fears

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Central Asian governments are preparing themselves for a new round of Islamic rebel hostilities

For months now, Central Asia has been bracing itself for a spring offensive by Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU.

The region's mass media have broadcast repeated warnings of the imminent return of the insurgents

The IMU's territorial objective is the Fergana valley - which straddles Tajikistan, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan.

Back in January, Kyrgyz Interior Minister Tashtemir Aitbayev warned the rebels were using the winter months to store food and ammunition in preparation for a military campaign.

Then, in February, at a Bishkek meeting of security officials from Russia, China, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyz General Askar Mameev declared the feared IMU offensive could be on a bigger scale than its actions in 1999 and 2000.

General Mameev has estimated the number of IMU militants in Tajikistan as being between 1,500 and 2,000, many of whom winter in camps in the mountainous east of Tajikistan.

Despite Dushanbe's widely publicised efforts to root out and punish the terrorists, there are those who doubt the Tajik coalition government is of one mind on the militants.

There are even suggestions that Dushanbe has not done everything it could to curtail the rebels' activities.

Some observers have suggested that certain Tajik government officials sympathetic to the militants' desire for political representation may be secretly aiding them.

If the Tajik government is only half-heartedly attempting to clampdown on the fundamentalists, this could back up an opinion shared by some observers that extreme militants are actually useful to the government here. Not that Tajikistan is alone in this.

Terrorism and insurgency in Central Asia hand a trump card to governments in the region who are constantly in search of scapegoats for their sluggish economies and poor human rights and governance records.

Now that the Islamic militants have been designated international terrorists, governments feel free to redouble their efforts to neutralise inconvenient domestic opposition while they counter their real enemies.

Unfortunately, in Central Asia the first casualty of counter-insurgency is likely to be democracy.

Counter-insurgency also undermines inter-state relations as the IMU concentrates its attacks in the Fergana valley.

The ramshackle border delineation of the Fergana valley sets it at the heart of disputes between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, each of which wants control over this highly fertile region.

At present, Uzbekistan controls the Fergana's central lowlands, Kyrgyzstan its upper reaches and Tajikistan its Western access point.

The valley's infrastructure for transportation, energy, water management and commerce requires close inter-state cooperation. But in recent years the countries have found this increasingly difficult as they pursued separate economic development strategies.

Uzbekistan has long been dissatisfied with the ill-defined and unworkable borders within the Fergana valley. Their negotiators have pushed hard bargains with their less resourceful Kyrgyz counterparts in the recent boundary talks.

Should military conflict arise again in the Fergana valley, the ill-defined borders may not be able to contain Uzbekistan's anti-terrorist campaign - although Tashkent officials scoff at the suggestion that they have any significant territorial ambitions on Kyrgyzstan.

While the IMU threat is proving divisive in some areas, the wave of terrorist attacks, which began in 1998, has also helped diplomatically bind the Central Asian states against the common enemy.

The threat came to the fore with the anti-government uprising in Tajikistan in November 1998. This was followed three months later by the Tashkent bombings. Kyrgyzstan was then drawn into the crisis after a series of hostage-taking incidents in 1999 and 2000.

To cap it all, in September 2000, an irregular military force pushed into southern Uzbekistan, some of the rebels even managed to advance to within 100 kilometers of the Uzbek capital.

In the wake of these events, the Central Asian countries appear to have adopted a new level of cooperativeness. The passing year has witnessed a series of high-level meetings and agreements on joint security measures.

Under the auspices of the "Shanghai Forum", Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have made common cause in countering terrorism and religious extremism.

Another sign of the quickening cooperation is the planned establishment of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Asia (OSCA).

It is well to remember that whether there is an IMU spring offensive or not, the events may not follow the script that is being repeated in the Central Asian mass media. Deception, which is a key tactic of guerilla groups, is also sometimes an important element in inter-state diplomacy.

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