

Kazakstan Bolsters Defences

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Astana tightens security fearing the Afghan conflict may spill over into southern Kazakstan.

On the morning of October 9 a military train loaded with arms and artillery passed through the railway station at Shymkent in southern Kazakstan and headed for Uzbekistan.

Whether the weapons belonged to Kazakstan or Russia was unclear to a group of journalists who spotted the convoy. They approached the Kazak defence ministry, but it refused to comment.

But the sight of so much military equipment inevitably fuelled speculation among the residents of Shymkent, the capital of southern Kazakstan, about the conflict in Afghanistan and its possible impact on their country.

The area is already feeling the effects of America's war with the Taleban regime. On the night of the first US strikes against Afghanistan, Astana placed all the armed forces in the south on a heightened state of alert.

Shymkent is 600 km north of Afghanistan. Between them lies Uzbekistan, a much poorer country than its huge northern neighbour, and one where Islam has a much stronger influence.

Most Kazaks have a poor opinion of the Uzbek government. They believe its army is weak and note the threat the Islamic insurgency movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, poses the Karimov regime.

With a neighbour in such a poor state, they look on the US military action in Afghanistan with unconcealed alarm.

Kazakstan's large ethnic Russian minority is most concerned. It, above all, fears the Taleban will retaliate against Uzbekistan for granting the use of its airports and airspace to the US, and then possibly threaten Kazakstan. Tashkent is only one hour's drive from Shymkent.

Nina Feodorovna, a 67-year-old ethnic Russian, says the constant talk of war has sent her blood pressure soaring. "I am very afraid of the Taleban," she said. "I doubt either the Uzbek or the Kazak army will be able to stop them."

She is not reassured by Kazakstan's defence ties to Russia through the Collective Security Agreement. "It would be good if Russia helped us but I don't believe it and I'm afraid our [Kazak] Muslims will support the Taleban," said Anna Feodorovna.

She pointed to the recent discovery of a cell of the Islamic Khizb-ut-Tahrir party in the cities of Turkestan and Kentau, and the increasing number of mosques in Kazakstan as ominous signs of the way things were going.

Many ethnic Russians say their relatives in Russia telephone them almost daily, urging them to leave

before it's too late. Valentina Andreevna has a daughter living in Ekaterinburg. "She calls every evening," she said, "and tells me to sell my apartment at once and move to her place in Ekaterinburg."

The indigenous Kazaks do not share the worries of the ethnic Russians on that score. They are less convinced that the Taleban will move into Central Asia. Men who have served in the army and have military expertise reckon the Afghans, in spite of their experience of guerrilla warfare, will not be able to withstand Western firepower when they are obliged to fight in the open.

"I have fought in Afghanistan," Ibraim, 43, said. "The Afghans are wonderful warriors but they do not like long battles. Their methods are lightening attacks, ambushes and firing at the moving convoys in locations where they feel like fish in the water."

Military officials, of course, say nothing. Since the start of the US action in Afghanistan, they have been unwilling to communicate with journalists, fobbing them off with vague phrases about troops repulsing any aggression.

But there has been a notable increase in the number of uniformed persons in the streets and the number of policemen and military patrols has also grown. The deployment of guards round official buildings, banks and post offices have been strengthened. Reservists with experience in the ill-fated Soviet invasion of Afghanistan are being called up every day.

The security forces are confident they can repel any unwanted visitors. Officers of the interior ministry special forces in Shymkent insist their units can meet any military challenge.

One border guard chief in the south, Abai Brekeshev, said the country's southern frontier was under complete control and that hostile military units stood no chance of bypassing his men and penetrating Kazakstan.

At the Jibek Joly checkpoint, on the border between Kazakstan and Uzbekistan, life goes on as normal. The only obvious difference is the increased number of military personnel and the stricter regime of the customs officers and border guards. The head of customs control said even country lanes across the frontier were now being monitored round-the-clock.

Between 3,000 and 3,500 people cross the Uzbek-Kazak frontier every day. Many are ethnic Kazaks who believe Uzbekistan is unsafe. The Uzbek currency, the som, has slipped in value against the Kazak tenge.

When they meet in the streets, the residents of Shymkent invariably discuss the war. Not everybody believes military action will spill over into Kazakstan. What they really fear is a tidal wave of refugees and epidemics from Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Asked what he would do if the Taleban come, Kairat, 28, just smiled. "I will fight," he declared. "I have nowhere to run, this is my land and I will defend it. Besides, nothing good in my life has come in peace time, so maybe war will bring me luck."

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