

Kyrgyz General Blames Fighting on Drug Barons

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Russian and Central Asian troops are to launch joint military exercises this month in anticipation of fresh incursions across the Kyrgyz-Tajik border

The Kyrgyz government is blaming powerful drugs cartels for outbreaks of violence on the Tajik border which threaten to destabilise the surrounding regions.

The claims contradict some independent reports that recent clashes with government troops are part of an ongoing struggle to set up an Islamic state in the Fergana Valley.

In an interview with IWPR, Major-General Bolot Januzakov, secretary for the Kyrgyz security council, said the armed groups were using religious extremism as a pretext for protecting their drug-trafficking routes from Afghanistan.

He stressed that the fighters did not represent any government and had no particular national or even religious association. "[They are] a band of criminals of various nationalities from various countries," he said. "There are Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Kazaks, Afghans, Iranians, Arabs, Pakistanis, Indians...even Russians. The overwhelming majority are criminals who have no real connection with Islam."

Januzakov went on to say, "We know perfectly well what their plans are. They announced them last year. They want to set up an Islamic state or caliphate within the Fergana Valley. But this is just a cover - the most important factor is that they will be protecting the drug-trafficking route that they have laid out from Afghanistan.

"The idea of an Islamic state in the Fergana Valley is nonsense," Januzakov said. "Neither the people of Kyrgyzstan, nor the people of Uzbekistan, nor our Tajik brothers will permit it. The people reject them."

Dubbing them "terrorists", the major-general estimated there were around 400 fighters scattered across Tajikistan but their numbers were sometimes boosted by recruits from nearby Afghanistan.

Januzakov believes last August's incursion into the Batken region of Southern Kyrgyzstan marked their first serious show of strength.

The fighters took a number of local inhabitants and four Japanese geologists hostage then headed back into the mountains on the Kyrgyz -Tajik border.

Januzakov rejected the suggestion that the armed groups had moved into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan because of a proliferation of opium plantations.

He argued instead that the high mountain paths to the south have now become well established as part of the Great Drugs Route. Raw opium and heroin are transported via Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan across into Uzbekistan, Kazakstan and Russia, before being smuggled into Western Europe.

Januzakov explained that these groups were fully capable of joining forces in order to defend their drugs business.

The growing threat posed by the cash-rich groups is forcing the Kyrgyz leadership to review and reform internal security and law enforcement agencies. The army, which is relatively small, lacks the military know-how

and strength to combat armed incursions.

As a result, Kyrgyzstan cannot cope without external support. "We are

working in close cooperation with all the countries of the CIS," noted

Januzakov.

As part of a concerted initiative to combat terrorism, defence ministry chiefs from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan met in Bishkek last November to discuss Cooperation 2000. These joint military exercises, due to start on March 28, are aimed at developing tactics and strategy for mutual assistance in the event of future incursions from the south.

Januzakov refused to confirm reports that the self-declared Islamic militants were busy setting up cells -- not only in the south of Kyrgyzstan, but also in the north. He did however confirm that leaflets belonging to the militant Khizb-ut-Tahrir group (based in the Fergana Valley) have been found in the Osh and Dzhalsal-Abad regions in the south.

Januzakov also dismissed rumours that defeated rebels fleeing the war in Chechnya could find their way into Kyrgyzstan. He said that "all possible measures" were being taken to ensure that fighters, "don't make their way into the republic under the guise of peaceful civilians."

The major-general added, "I want to emphasise that the security situation can easily worsen as a direct result of panic, confusion, rumour and false conjecture. Terrorism relies on and feeds off that."

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