

Kyrgyz Private Relives Batken Nightmare

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A veteran of military operations against Islamic guerrillas in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan has told of how the Central Asian troops were ill equipped and poorly led.

Egor Nikolaev, a native of Bishkek, volunteered to fight in last year's Batken offensive, driven by unemployment and a sense of duty.

This year, disenchanted by the indifference of the Kyrgyz military command, he has refused to return.

The fighting in the Batken region, against guerrillas thought to be from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, has flared again over the past month. The Kyrgyz Security Council admits to 24 casualties, almost as many as during the whole operation last year.

"What really shocked me in Batken," Nikolaev remarked in an interview, "was the 'strategy and tactics' of the military leadership. If the rebel fighters had wanted to shoot us all, they could have done it in about five minutes."

Nikolaev said he joined as part of a group of 800 young Kyrgyz in Koi-Tash in September 1999.

"The bosses didn't even know what to do with such a mass of people to begin with," he said. "He (the commander) said that they couldn't pay like the Russians, but he promised 50 dollars a day. He also frankly promised that 'you're going there to die...'"

"Finally a battalion of 360 men was put together, including reserve soldiers and volunteers, and Afghan vets. We were given new uniforms there in Koi-Tash. We weren't so lucky with weapons. All the firearms - machineguns and grenade launchers - were antiquated circa 1974 models in terrible condition - we were lucky that they weren't rusty," he said.

"True, some people got new sniper's rifles. But they weren't much use. For the course of the whole war we never got scopes for them. They'd brought nine P-127 radios, of which only two worked, and they weighed 25 kilograms each. We didn't get any flak jackets whatsoever.

"We did get helmets, but they're useless and only get in the way in a fight - the Wahi [that's what the battalion called the Islamic fighters] only used 7.62 mm Kalashnikovs, and they'd blow right through the helmets without any problem."

Officials from across the border in Uzbekistan say the guerrillas are funded by Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire blamed by the United States for the World Trade Centre bombing, who boast links with the Afghan Taliban and Chechen Wahhabi factions.

Kyrgyz military officials say they have evidence that Juma Namangani, a prominent IMU leader, is using two helicopters provided by the Taleban. They also say IMU fighters have received military and sabotage training at bases inside Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The guerrillas say they are waging a Jihad - a Moslem holy war -- against Uzbekistan in a bid to create an Islamic state in the republic. Founded on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Wahhabis reject the veneration of saints and holy places, calling for a purification of Islam from later innovations.

Nikolaev said the Kyrgyz troops were no match for the guerrillas.

"We'd move out at night. Towards Shudman, in the direction of the Abramov iceberg, where the Japanese hostages were being held. 126 soldiers for the first time in those mountains, pitch black darkness, the line spread out over two kilometers, with the guides somewhere way out in front - sitting ducks, especially because the fighters didn't have the sort of antique firearms that we were equipped with," Nikolaev said.

The August 1999 offensive began when the Uzbek guerrillas swooped on the Batken district, in the Fergana Valley - an area straddling three Central Asian republics. Racing across the border with Tajikistan, the fighters seized five villages and took seven hostages, including four Japanese geologists.

"The only reason we didn't get shot that night was because it wasn't part of the plan of the Wahabbis. And we were literally following right after them. On the way we'd come across pots with the meat in them still hot, and bags of flour," Nikolaev said.

"We were lucky because they didn't leave any mines or trip wires after them. The total indifference to us really used to shock us.

"We were based in Shudman for a week. During the entire seven days, food was only brought in once - for a hundred hungry soldiers they brought rations intended for thirty. So we fed ourselves with anything we could find. One day half the battalion spent half a day chasing after mountain goats, and finally we bagged three of them. We ate them immediately.

Nikolaev bemoaned the lack of support from Kyrgyzstan's neighbours.

"From Uzbekistan, which promised help, we didn't get anything. From the Uzbek army, our battalion received 40 flare mines. And that was it! That was enough for about half a night.

"It was very amusing to read in the local press that 'Kyrgyz aviation had carried out bombing raids on the locations where the fighters had assembled'. There's no Kyrgyz aviation out there," he went on.

"The Uzbeks bombed from up on high. And there were only eight MI-8 helicopters in use in Batken. They fitted unguided missiles on each side of them, a machine-gunner with a spotlight, and that was the full extent of our aviation forces."

When Egor Nikolaev's comrades returned home from the Batken war, they were met by indifference from the military leaders, so they set up a picket. They were quickly dispersed and threatened with punishment for fomenting unrest.

"I can be honest about the money. We didn't make anything on that war. Don't believe that you can earn any money as a private," he said.

"When we were back in Khaidarkan we were told that we wouldn't be paid the promised 50 dollars a day, and that we would get 300 som a day (\$6), the first three hundred being paid out straightaway. And when I got back to Bishkek I personally got paid off with 1400 som (\$28). And that was it. They even threatened to charge us for lost spoons and flasks."

Nikolaev disputes that the guerrillas are fighting to establish an Islamic state in the Fergana region, a view echoed by the Kyrgyz military, which maintains they are trying to expand drug trafficking routes to the north through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"Everything that's been repeated in Batken, isn't some mythical intrusion by a group of Islamic religious fanatics. Five hundred fighters are distracting the armies of two countries while tons of drugs are being shipped by," Nikolaev said.

"Drugs are the reason behind the military operations in this area where, at a certain point in time, they started to tighten the controls on the borders."

General Bolot Djanuzakov, Secretary of the Kyrgyz Security Council, said recently that the present Batken activity could be a distracting manoeuvre to enable the drug traffickers to move their goods unmolested.

The routes through Batken are the shortest and, until last year's fighting, the least guarded. According to Djanuzakov's sources, one and a half tonnes of heroin has been amassed in the Tavildara region in southeast Tajikistan.

The general said he believed the upsurge in IMU activity is partly payback for the money, facilities and equipment provided by "international terrorist centres", mostly in Afghanistan. The incursions into Batken and southern Uzbekistan, he said, aimed to destabilise the situation across Central Asia.

But for Nikolaev, this is not enough to make him go back.

"I'm not going to war anymore," he said. "I understood that war is just a big political game, where we, the privates, are just cannon fodder."

Asel Otorbaeva is a regular IWPR contributor in Bishkek.

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