

Kyrgyzstan on Alert After Osh Clash

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Security service insists operation targeting armed group was pre-planned and does not mark return to instability.

Security officials in Kyrgyzstan have appealed for calm after a firefight with suspected militants in the southern city of Osh, insisting the authorities are in control and there will be no repetition of the mass violence seen in June.

The interior ministry said four armed men were killed on November 29 when they put up resistance to a raid by security forces targeting a group of “national separatists”. Three appear to have been shot and the fifth killed himself by detonating explosives.

Four members of the security services were injured.

The clash took place next to the central bus station in Osh, and five minutes’ walk from the main market, one of the city’s most crowded locations. This part of Osh is mainly home to ethnic Uzbeks.

A statement from the National Security Service appealed to people not to be led astray by rumours that Osh was about to undergo a renewed wave of ethnic violence.

Osh and Jalalabad and rural areas around them experienced a sudden, brief and brutal outbreak of clashes involving the ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in June. The fighting left more than 400 people dead, according to the government, and a trail of deliberate destruction in its wake.

The security service statement said the police were in full control in Osh, patrolling the streets and setting up checkpoints at entry points to the city.

It said at least one of the men had been positively linked to a plan to stage terror attacks in Osh and the Kyrgyz capital, which was foiled by a police operation carried out on November 22. That raid resulted in several arrests and the seizure of home-made explosives and remote control detonating devices.

In Osh, the sound of gunfire sparked panic among locals who feared the June bloodshed was about to start all over again. The mood of fear has since subsided, eyewitnesses say.

A market trader who gave his name as Rahmon recalled how people in the city market started fleeing after hearing an explosion.

“Kyrgyz and Uzbeks started running away from the bazaar without thinking of their goods and belongings – anything just to get away,” he said.

The Osh bazaar came close to a standstill following the clashes this summer, and trade has picked up slowly. When the explosion described by Rahmon happened, it was near the end of trading and people were beginning to leave.

The driver of a minibus taxi described the scene of panic, “There was a stampede, but none of my passengers got hurt.”

A construction worker called Akmal left the building site he was on near the market after hearing the blast.

“There were rumours that an ethnic war had started,” he explained. “We could see that people were scared, above all of being in the one place, in this market. They were fleeing in droves.”

Early accounts of the armed group’s identity were unclear. The secretary of Kyrgyzstan’s Security Council, Marat Imankulov, told a press conference in Bishkek that the police operation in Osh was a follow-up to earlier raids in which alleged supporters of the “Islamic Movement of Turkestan” were detained.

This is presumably a reference to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a known group active in Central Asia in 1999-2000 and currently operating out of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At press conference earlier in the day, before the explosion in Osh attracted public attention, Kyrgyz interior minister Zarylbek Rysaliev said the suspects arrested in the police raid a week ago were part of a group with underworld connections, and no link to international terror organisations. These armed men, he said, were hired to destabilise Kyrgyzstan by a group of individuals whom he did not identify.

But after the fighting was over, the interior ministry spoke of “national separatists”, without giving any further explanation.

Analysts say southern Kyrgyzstan remains vulnerable to disruption and the authority of central government remains weak there.

Kadyr Malikov, head of the Religion, Law and Politics Centre in Bishkek, says there are any number of potential threats to stability – supporters of ex-president Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was ousted during popular unrest in April; new forces thrown up by the ethnic violence; organised crime groups, old and new; Islamic extremists, either from known organisations like the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir or new ones as yet unidentified; and hired troublemakers, paid by some external force.

Experts say the authorities need to ensure their narrative of events hits the right note and avoids stirring up tensions.

“The most important thing for this country and society right now is to prevent this incident in Osh being labelled as ethnic,” Elmira Nogoybaeva, head of the Polis Asia think-tank in Bishkek, told IWPR. “This could happen with lightning speed, given that there are many pretexts for ethnic manipulation, which destructive forces can use to their advantage.”

Nogoybaeva said excessive speculation in the media would be unhelpful, “When people get agitated, it has a snowball effect on the level of rumour-mongering. That’s dangerous and it will have consequences, because the public reacts to such things immediately. What happens today in one individual region of Kyrgyzstan reverberates across the whole country.”

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