

## **Kyrgyzstan: Russians Oppose US Deployment**

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Some ethnic Russians are leaving Kyrgyzstan because of their opposition to the imminent deployment of thousands of troops in the country.

The agreement between Bishkek and Washington to set up an American military base in Kyrgyzstan has alarmed ethnic Russians who have lived here for several generations. Some are even leaving country as a result.

According to Russian Emigration Service staff members in Kyrgyzstan, the forms for citizens wishing to permanently move from the republic to Russia increasingly cite the presence of the American military as the reason for them wanting to leave.

"I'm planning to move, not only because the economic situation is very difficult, but because of the American troops," ethnic Russian Raisa Veresokhina told IWPR.

"I hate the US and its soldiers," said student Alexei Yelizarov. "When I saw American military jeeps on the streets recently I wanted to throw stones at them. American foreign policy has brought the whole world to its knees. They should get out of here."

Although not as numerous as they used to be during the soviet era, the more than quarter of a million-strong Russian community is known as the most vocal and politically active minority here.

Ethnic Russians are particularly disturbed by the fact that the US military presence in Kyrgyzstan may be prolonged and diminish Moscow's influence in the region.

Almost all the minority, to a greater or lesser extent, have tied their future, hopes and aspirations to Russia and to a Russian presence in Central Asia.

Most have families and relatives in Russia, and prefer to send their children to study there. In addition, they watch Russian television and read Russian newspapers. Their whole perspective is Russian.

Kyrgyzstan will host 3,000 American servicemen. Over 250 US military-technical personnel have already arrived in Bishkek, preparing a base for the troops. Their arrival in Kyrgyzstan follows American deployments in other parts of the Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in support of the campaign against Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network.

American soldiers are scheduled to stay in Kyrgyzstan for a year, but some here are concerned that they will want to extend their deployment. Valentin Upolovnikov, chairman of the Congress of Russian Compatriots (an ethnic Russian alliance), said, "If the Americans don't leave Kyrgyzstan in a year, in accordance with the agreements reached at an intergovernmental level, it will mean another major loss for Russia in the arena of world politics."

"Why is the US planning to be stationed in Kyrgyzstan when the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan is almost completed?" inquired Mikhail Butnev, the founder of the Cossack movement, a group uniting descendants of the militant tribesmen who assisted the Russian tsar to establish Russian influence in

Central Asia in 19th century.

The historian, political analyst and lecturer, Danil Kvashuk, said, " I'm sure the Americans aren't worried about our security concerns and the struggle against terrorism - they're pursuing their geopolitical aims."

Kyrgyz believe their government allowed the US to deploy here with the agreement of Moscow, but some believe the public should have been consulted. "If Kyrgyzstan is calling itself the second Switzerland, then why wasn't a referendum held, as is done in Switzerland on the smallest issues?" remarked Kvashuk.

Many Kyrgyz officials have tried to reassure the public that their country will receive enormous dividends from its military collaboration with the US and NATO, in the form of an enormous inflow of investment.

However, economists are pouring cold water on such predictions. The director of the Russian-Kyrgyz economics journal The Capitals Market, Nadezhda Gorokhova, said, "American businessmen won't follow their soldiers into Kyrgyzstan. They've long since come to the conclusion that you can't do legal business here."

The general director of a major Russian-Kyrgyz trading company, Mikhail Volodkin, agreed. "American businessmen are unlikely to get on here, because the colossal corruption will take the shirts off their backs," he said. " And I'm convinced that any money that does come in is likely to end up in the pockets of some bureaucrats."

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