

Mayhem in Osh

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IWPR editor describes four days of violence and chaos in southern city.

We were woken at 1.30 in the morning of Thursday-Friday night [June 10-11] by terrible gunfire in central Osh, where we were staying, not far from the Alay and Kristall hotels where it all began. There was shouting, noise, gunshots, and the sound of fire engines.

When we had first arrived, people in the streets and marketplaces asked us why we had come at such a time, given that something was about to kick off.

Now we saw what everyone had predicted was actually starting.

The extent and volume of the gunfire made it immediately clear that this wasn't the same as what had happened in Bishkek in April [when mass protests by unarmed demonstrators forced a change of government]. This was something completely different – terrible shouts and bloodcurdling cries.

The shooting continued till morning. We couldn't sleep, so we began ringing round and gathering information. The gunfire continued uninterrupted and grew more intense as time passed.

Our home is at a crossroads and made a good observation point from which to watch what was going on. The next day, masked men appeared on the streets armed with sticks and guns. These lads covered their faces with kerchiefs so that only their eyes were showing, some had military-style bandanas as well. So all you saw was their eyes and black masks.

The looting came a bit later, the shooting came first.

By midday on Friday [June 11] the city was on fire. Ash, dust and cinders settled on our balcony.

It was clear this wasn't going to stop any time soon.

On the Saturday evening, military operations began and they used heavy artillery. The walls shook. Suleiman Mountain was alight.

WAS THE VIOLENCE PLANNED IN ADVANCE?

When we drove through the city later, it looked like the aftermath of bombing in the Second World War, all ash and ruins. That couldn't have been done in three days if it had really happened spontaneously, so it had clearly been planned out in advance.

People were preparing for this to happen – that was apparent from the general air of tension. The day before we had gone to Jalalabad, and along the way we talked to drivers and other people. The overall sense of tension was palpable, it was the anticipation of ethnic conflict.

One of our drivers was Kyrgyz, and the next one Uzbek, and they were all talking about it. On the way back from Jalalabad on the Thursday, we learned that there was a big fight between Kyrgyz and Uzbek lads near the central mosque in Osh. The fight followed a row between a Kyrgyz taxi driver and an Uzbek passenger.

Some time earlier, my neighbour went to the market and people there told her to buy in food as a war was about to begin between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

So everyone knew about it, everyone was expecting it, but it seems no one tried to stop it

This was organised very carefully. Pre-arranged local incidents took place in one district, then another.

They knew where they were going. Vehicles carrying armed men drove up the Aravan Road, which intersects with the main street, towards those areas where Uzbek neighbourhoods were located. Carloads of armed men went off in that direction, and then they came back.

A vehicle drove up and unloaded bottles of water and bread, which were handed out to the armed groups on the street. Those manning makeshift checkpoints on the road were brought parcels, maybe weapons or maybe just food.

So it was all very well organised, that much was obvious.

SHORTAGES AND POWER CUTS

The firemen next door to us complained their water was getting turned off. The next day, the electricity and gas were simultaneously switched off in our central district. This whole area, the epicentre where everything had begun, was more or less cut off.

The electrical substations had been set on fire and people said the power might have been cut off to prevent explosions.

So people had no electricity, no gas and no food. There were also rumours that the water had been poisoned. There wasn't any mineral water. So people boiled water in pots over fires on the street.

The panic was the most terrible thing for people in the houses around us. There were some like pensioners who hadn't really laid in any supplies, and they realised they might starve. Most people were informed and forewarned, but this was on such a massive scale.

There was no food as all the bigger shops had been robbed. People stole whatever they could. We had come for another town, so we didn't know where to go. Maybe the locals were able to sort themselves out somehow.

You couldn't go out into the street, and if you did, the shops were all closed. There was no food but looters were sitting by the roadside eating sausages.

People consumed whatever they had. We finished everything we had by the third day. We were able to eat thanks to a small amount of relief aid we received from Internews.

ETHNIC DIVISIONS

If you divide the city up along ethnic lines, the centre is a mainly Kyrgyz district. I mostly saw Kyrgyz people, though they say it was an inter-ethnic conflict. I did see Uzbeks, but they were going through the yard on tiptoe carrying bags with them; they were hiding or trying to get out

They say it's a conflict based on ethnicity, that it was disgruntled young lads who had come in from the countryside. But there was certainly some kind of force behind them.

Ordinary people have been living as neighbours for many years, and they had no part in it. In the Kyrgyz district, Kyrgyz hid Uzbeks, Russians hid Uzbeks.

Very few people from other groups live in the Uzbek neighbourhoods. In the Cheremushki district where Uzbeks live, all the houses were set on fire.

The people running around with weapons have clearly been hired by someone to do this. You can't say they have a motive, all they know for sure is that they are fighting against another ethnic group. That's all.

I saw large groups of people and they were all armed. We drove through the town when we had to get out. You couldn't have been there without protection. They were offering weapons – a couple of Kalashnikovs, a sawn-off shotgun. They said we'd need weapons and offered to sell us them.

ESCAPE BY ARMoured CAR

I naively thought it would be like Bishkek – a couple of days and then everything would calm down. But that wasn't how it turned out.

Because I am a journalist and I have contacts, I rang all the top people in government. I got help from Omurbek Suvanaliev, the chief of police in Osh who was very active in evacuating journalists. He said he'd send a vehicle and an armed guard which would take us to the district police. Then they'd get us to the airport in an armoured vehicle, because the road there goes through Uzbek villages where things were very bad, and you couldn't get through in an ordinary vehicle as there was constant crossfire.

So they took us to the airport in an armoured personnel carrier. Then we had spend ten hours waiting to get on a plane. They had announced that civilians could get out on planes that were bringing in humanitarian aid. So everyone went for the airport on foot, across fields, or by other routes.

[This account is taken from an interview which Inga Sikorskaya gave to IWPR radio editor Nurlan Abdaliev on her return to Bishkek. This online version has been edited slightly; the original audio interview is available here in Russian.]

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