

Rahmonov Warns of Afghan Terror Threat

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The Taleban may have been toppled, but Tajikistan believes Afghanistan is still a source of real danger.

The government has voiced fears that Afghanistan still poses a threat to Central Asia, in spite of the overthrow of the Taleban regime in November 2001.



Special forces of Russian border troops during the raid on suspected drug traffickers on the river Pyandj on the Tajik-Afghan border.
Photo by Sergey Zhukov.

While the overall security situation is believed to have improved, President Imomali Rahmonov told a June 18 meeting of CIS Border Force commanders, "We shouldn't relax our guard. There is still a real threat from Afghanistan."

The Tajik leader claimed while the United States and its allies may have brought down the Taleban, countless lives were still in danger from the al-Qaeda network, which may regroup and take revenge on the Central Asian states that have supported the US-led coalition.

"We have information that these terrorist organisations are planning reprisals against the countries of Central Asia and the foreign military forces on their territories," he said.

"Acts are being prepared that could be on the same scale as the terrorist attacks on America. They will be planned with maximum sensational effect and may threaten the lives of millions of people."

Many states in the region offered assistance to the US following the September 11 attacks, opening airspace and donating air bases for humanitarian relief missions. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan also allowed western troops to deploy on their soil.

Following the destruction of terrorist cells in Afghanistan, experts now fear that extremists will turn their attention to Central Asia.

Tajikistan's main security problem lies in the east, which the government has not fully controlled since the 1992-97 civil war. While peace was declared across the country, this region remained vulnerable to attack by the rebel Islamic Movement of Tajikistan.

The eastern terrain is ideal for such groups, with many camps and bases dotted around the mountainous, almost inaccessible landscape.

Russian security officials attending the Dushanbe meeting warned that Islamic rebels were trying to penetrate Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

The head of the Russian Federal Border Service, Konstantin Totsky, said his men had detained several small groups of fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, in February and March as they tried to enter Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

Totsky said that while those fighters had been stopped, it was entirely possible that other groups had been successful.

Juma Namangani, the IMU leader who struck terror into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan towards the end of the Nineties, remains a real worry for Central Asian governments. The Northern Alliance claimed its forces had killed Namangani in November 2001, but in May of this year it emerged that he was alive and well.

Now experts fear that his survival will be a rallying call to the Central Asian Islamists, presently scattered throughout Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's drug trade is another cause for concern. The president told the June 18 meeting that the flow of narcotics through Central Asian countries had increased, confounding predictions of a possible reduction following the 2001 anti-terrorist campaign. As a result, the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border remains tense.

Rahmonov laid the blame for the continuing threat from terrorism and drugs squarely on Afghanistan's transitional administration, claiming that it does not control its territory. "The authority of the new Afghan government is only effective in Kabul. In the provinces, every field commander rules as he sees fit," he said.

The president warned that Afghanistan could only return to normality - and thus cease to pose a danger to its neighbours - under a government that included representatives of all major ethnic groups. Only that, he said, would provide Afghanistan with lasting stability and remove the threat to Central Asia.

Vladimir Davlatov is the pseudonym of a journalist in Tajikistan

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