

## **South Kyrgyzstan Slides Out of Control**

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Government official insists worst is over, but gunfire continues and refugees run for the Uzbek border.

Southern Kyrgyzstan remained chaotic following days of clashes that spread from Osh to the neighbouring areas and drove tens of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks to flee towards the border with Uzbekistan.

Local journalists in Osh said the gunfire largely subsided on June 14, although the occasional shot still rang out.

In and around Jalalabad, however, fighting between rival armed groups continued.

Bodies lay unclaimed in the streets in both towns, and many homes set on fire during clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were smoking ruins.

People were afraid to leave their homes, as bands of men roamed the streets on foot and the occasional vehicle without license plates drove by with Kalashnikov rifle barrels sticking out of the windows.

The violence began in Osh overnight on June 10-11, escalated in the city the following day and spread to Jalalabad region over the weekend. (See **Renewed Unrest in South Kyrgyzstan** on the start of the fighting.)

The Kyrgyz health ministry said 124 people died and nearly 1,700 required medical treatment as of June 14.

Many ethnic Uzbeks fled towards Uzbekistan. A spokesman for the Kyrgyz border guards told IWPR that preliminary estimates suggested there were some 60,000 refugees at the frontier, although other estimates put the figure higher.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR said it was to airlift aid to Uzbekistan to help the refugees. It said Uzbek government figures indicated there were now 75,000 in the country.

A resident of Bazar-Korgon who gave his name as Murat was among 3,000 people waiting at a checkpoint to cross into Uzbekistan. He and his family crossed fields to get there, avoiding roadblocks. He told IWPR that the Uzbek frontier guards were only letting injured people, women and children through.

The interim government, which came to power in April after popular unrest unseated Kurmanbek Bakiev as president, extended the state of emergency and curfew from Osh to Jalalabad.

Interim head of state Roza Otunbaeva asked Moscow to send in its military to Osh, but President Dmitry Medvedev said he had no plans to do so, although he might convene an emergency meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. This Russian-led security bloc has a mandate to send in peacekeepers if requested by a member state. (For more, see **Kyrgyzstan Begs Moscow to Help Quell Riots.**)

Noting that Russia was not planning to send in troops for the moment, Abdygany Erkebaev of the Kyrgyz interim government said his country's own army and police were manifestly unable to cope.

Nevertheless, he suggested that the worst was over.

"The situation in Kyrgyzstan remains difficult but I believe the peak of these tragic events has passed," he said during a conference in the capital Bishkek.

Reporters in Osh said the situation was relatively calm late on June 14. Food supplies were running and the gas supply was cut. Consignments of aid, mainly flour, reached the city and was distributed locally, although it was unclear whether it was reaching those who needed it now.

One local resident who gave his first name as Jakyp said humanitarian aid was not a priority for him right now. "We need peace and security," he explained.

In Jalalabad region, there was shooting overnight on June 13-14 and houses were set on fire. Tensions were high in Jalalabad city and in the nearby towns of Suzak and Bazar-Korgon, which have mixed Kyrgyz-Uzbek populations.

A refugee from Bazaar-Korgon who gave his first name as Ziyannuddin said all the Uzbeks had left the town, and the only ones still there were men protecting their property. Those homes left unattended were being looted and torched, he added.

Talks took place between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in Jalalabad in an attempt to dampen things down. Kubatbek Baibolov, appointed security chief in Jalalabad in recent days, said the talks went well. In remarks quoted by the Russian news agency Lenta.ru, he said armed factions had started surrendering their weapons, and a group of people accused of inciting the violence had been detained.

Some Jalalabad residents said the police force could be doing a lot more to protect civilians and seize weapons from armed groups.

Reservists drafted into military units under a June 13 government order were sent to the city.

But according to local journalist Jalil Saparov, "There are no police or soldiers to be seen on the streets of Jalalabad, still less in outlying villages. We hear that reinforcements have arrived but no one has actually seen them. The curfew isn't being observed, and gangsters and looters come out at night to rob the citizenry".

As in Osh, ad hoc volunteer groups appeared on the ground to defend their communities.

"We and our neighbours are setting up volunteer patrol units consisting of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz and protecting our own home and also the properties of neighbours who have left for safer places in the villages or in Uzbekistan," said Jalalabad resident Zaryl Mamatov. "We realise that the city, regional and national authorities are unable to control the situation fully."

Ernek, a Bishkek resident currently in southern Kyrgyzstan, said these volunteer militias were problematic, since they frequently disagreed, and some in their ranks were of suspect loyalty.

"Agents provocateurs are putting on military and police uniforms and shooting at Uzbeks," he said.

In Osh, some were already talking about the way forward, and whether reconciliation could take shape after the worst bloodshed Kyrgyzstan has seen since ethnic riots in 1990.

Lilia, a housewife in Osh, said after relatives were killed in the clashes, the only members of her large family left were her husband and two sisters. She said she hoped those behind the violence would be caught and punished.

Another local man, Nurlan, who is Kyrgyz, said some distant relatives had been killed, but insisted, "I don't harbour resentment towards my Uzbeks and Russian neighbours."

Saparov said the main thing right now was to restore law and order.

"People get annoyed when members of the interim government try to identify the culprits instead of sorting the situation out," he said. "At the moment, it isn't important who is behind all this. What needs to be done is to halt the bloodshed and make sure that young people don't get sucked into dangerous criminal gangs."

Ernek, meanwhile, noted the dearth of politicians and other public figures able to bridge the gap between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek community at such a difficult time.

Businessman Abdumalik said the bloodshed might never have happened if the original fight between two groups of young men had been stopped and contained. Now, though, things had changed irrevocably.

"It is no longer as it was. We're living in a different world now," he said.

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*This article was produced jointly under two IWPR projects: Building Central Asian Human Rights Protection & Education Through the Media, funded by the European Commission; and the Human Rights Reporting, Confidence Building and Conflict Information Programme, funded by the Foreign Ministry of Norway.*

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Also see **Story Behind the Story: Reporting on the Kyrgyz Unrest** published in RCA Issue 624, 27-Jul-10.

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**Location:** Kyrgyzstan

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/south-kyrgyzstan-slides-out-control>