

## **Storm Over Uzbek Land-mines**

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Protests grow as civilians fall victim to mines planted by the Uzbek military along the country's remote borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan

Landmines planted by the Uzbek military along the country's disputed frontier with Kyrgyzstan have left another two Kyrgyz civilians seriously injured, Bishkek officials said this month.

The accident was the fourth such incident reported since September and brings the casualty toll in Kyrgyzstan to 12. Tajik officials claim land-mines planted along their frontier with Uzbekistan have killed more than 15 people and wounded dozens of others.

Uzbekistan insists the ordnance is a necessary security precaution against infiltration by Islamic rebels.

In 1999 and again this year, members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which aims to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, staged armed incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Cooperation between Tashkent and Bishkek in combating the rebel attacks has led to improved relations between the two republics, especially on the economic and military fronts. But the land-mine issue threatens to jeopardise much of the progress.

The minefields have been laid along the Uzbek-Kyrgyz and Uzbek-Tajik borders in the Fergana valley and around the margins of the Uzbek enclave of Sokh in the southern Batken region of Kyrgyzstan.

Officials in Bishkek and Dushanbe claim the majority of victims are shepherds, women collecting firewood, children and drivers travelling across the borders. They complain the policy is clearly ineffective and victimises local residents.

Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov admits several civilians have been injured in land-mine accidents but blames the regional authorities for not taking preventive action. "They [the local authorities] have to make sure people in border regions are aware of land-mines" he said.

Uzbekistan's National Security Council Secretary, Mir-Akbar Rakhmankulov, dismissed claims that the ordnance had been deployed without informing neighbouring countries. "The Tajik military were provided with full information explaining where the mines had been planted and why these measures were taken."

But the Tajik Foreign Ministry has sent a protest note to the Uzbek government condemning the laying of ordnance as illegal under the Ottawa convention of 1997.

Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister Abdunabi Sattorzoda pointed out that Uzbekistan had not posted special warning signs in the affected areas, which had resulted in the deaths of several innocent people.

Tynychbek Kalybekov of the Kyrgyz border guard service denied maps indicating the location of land-mines had been handed over to the Kyrgyz military. He said the Bishkek authorities had not been informed in

good time.

The counter accusations are made more complex by the fact that the Central Asian republics are still in the initial phases of delimiting frontiers. Tashkent claims ordnance has only been deployed on the Uzbek side of the frontier, but Dushanbe and Bishkek dispute this.

The regional authorities in Batken assert that Uzbek soldiers laid mines 100 metres inside Kyrgyz territory.

Without a formal delimitation of the border, it is difficult to resolve this problem. Each side refers to frontier maps from different Soviet periods when the borders between the Central Asian republics moved to and fro.

Bishkek refers to maps produced in 1955, which it insists are fairer, while Tashkent favours boundaries drawn up in 1924.

There is a suspicion among some in Kyrgyzstan that the planting of land-mines by Uzbek forces along the disputed border is part of a strategy to impose a frontier before a joint commission can come up with a solution.

"The border running between Uzbekistan and the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan is the most difficult one," said Kyrgyzstan's main negotiator Salamat Alamanov.

"We proposed not only to start negotiations by discussing frontier problems in Batken, but also to set up a special group dealing with only this particular stretch of the border."

Alamanov said the Kyrgyz authorities were still awaiting a response from Tashkent.

While the border negotiations rumble on without much progress, there's growing anger over Uzbekistan's land-mine policy.

Following the death of one Tajik civilian, the Dushanbe media carried several emotive reports on the issue, criticising Uzbekistan's unneighbourly conduct and accusing Tashkent of violating international agreements on curbing mines.

"Who would dare to look into eyes of a teenage girl and explain why she has lost two legs by stepping on a land-mine?" asked the Asia Plus newspaper.

The Democratic Party and Communist Party of Tajikistan have joined the chorus of condemnation.

In Kyrgyzstan, there is a perception Uzbekistan fails to understand the cost of its policy.

"If anything Uzbekistan should pay compensation to us!" said Kyrgyz member of parliament Tashbolot Baltabaev. "Because thousands of hectares of pasture land are out of use, which has led to thousands of soms [the local currency] in losses"

"Regardless of whether your neighbour is small or big, you have to be on friendly terms. Its difficult to call the planting of land-mines friendly."

According to some local analysts, Uzbekistan, with its military operations against IMU groups straining its already weak economy, has resorted to using cheap land-mines to enhance border security.

But the price it will have to pay for worsening relations with its neighbours, on whom it relies to help combat Islamic fighters, could be much higher.

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