Tajik Polio Outbreak Strains Relations With Russia

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Moscow and Dushanbe fall out over restrictions to prevent disease spreading.

Moscow’s tough response to an outbreak of polio in Tajikistan has created some tension between the two nations, as Dushanbe ask for restrictions to be lifted.

The outbreak was spotted in April after doctors recorded an unusually high number of cases of with acute flaccid paralysis, a loss of muscle tone which is a symptom of the poliomyelitus virus. By May 16, the Tajik health ministry said there were 83 confirmed cases of polio, including one death. The following day, the World Health Organisation, WHO, gave a higher figure of 129 confirmed cases. The outbreak is concentrated in and around the capital Dushanbe and in the southern Katlon oblast in the south-western part of the country.

This is the first outbreak of the disease in Tajikistan since the last case was registered in 1997.

Poliomyelitis is a highly contagious disease affecting the nervous system and sometimes resulting in paralysis. It mainly affects children and is transmitted through contaminated food, drinking water and faeces.

The WHO said two rounds of a nationwide vaccination campaign for children under six had been completed, with a third due to take place in the first five days of June.

Concerned at the prospect of transmission via imported food or the hundreds of thousands of Tajik nationals who travel to Russia for work, Moscow took action at the beginning of May.

On May 2, it banned imports of Tajik nuts and dried fruit. The Russian consumer and health agency Rospotrebnadzor said these food items were a particular concern since they are consumed without being cooked.

Four days later, Moscow it introduced a travel ban for children from Tajikistan under the age of six until the end of the immunisation campaign. Rospotrebnadzor head Gennady Onitschenko said the ban became necessary after a nine-month-old baby who arrived from Tajikistan to the Siberian city of Irkutsk was diagnosed with polio.

For Tajikistan, the food ban was a particular blow as dried fruit and nuts are an important export.

On May 6, Tajik Foreign Minister Hamrokhon Zarifi handed Russian ambassador Yury Popov a note requesting an end to the import restrictions. The Tajik authorities argue that the nuts and fruit are safe as they come from the northern Soghd region, where no cases of polio have been recorded.

Dushanbe and Moscow also disagreed publicly over a decision to bring Russian children home until the danger had passed. Most of them are the children of personnel stationed at a permanent Russian military base in Tajikistan.

In an interview to a Russian radio station on May 11, Onitschenko said his agency had asked the Tajik authorities to provide every possible assistance to allow the children to leave swiftly. But he said obstructions had been placed in the way, and suggested that this was an attempt by the Tajiks to get the food ban lifted.

Tajik foreign ministry spokesman Davlat Nazriev denied the allegation, saying there were no obstacles to anyone leaving the country.

The Russian embassy in Dushanbe, meanwhile, tried to calm troubled waters by saying any travel problems were due not to obstructionism, but to the May 8-10 public holiday in Tajikistan commemorating the end of the Second World War.

The acrimonous exchanges over how to respond to the polio outbreak reflect wider frustrations in Tajikistan’s relationship with Moscow.

Political analysts in Tajikistan interviewed by IWPR suggested the Russians had ulterior motives for coming down hard over the polio issue. They believed it might have something to do with the ongoing construction of the giant Roghun hydroelectric dam. Russian companies withdrew from the project two years ago following contractual disagreements, and Uzbekistan has more recently been urging Moscow to back its own opposition to the plan, which it fears will deprive the region of water.
Dodojon Atovulloev, a Tajik opposition member in exile, drew comparisons with other instances in which Russia has imposed bans on former Soviet states when political relations deteriorate. As examples he cited wine from Georgia and Moldova and milk from Belarus.

Arkady Dubnov, a journalist in Moscow who specialises in Central Asian affairs, dismisses such suggestions, arguing that relations between Russia and Tajikistan are in fairly good shape. He believes the problems stemmed from an overreaction by Onitschenko, who should not be seen as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin.

Jumaboy Sanginov, who heads the parliamentary faction of the governing People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan, agreed that Moscow should not be accused of politicising the matter. A doctor by profession, Sanginov said Tajikistan should own up to its own failure to do enough to prevent the polio outbreak.

“The reason it has spread in Tajikistan is that in the past, not all residents of this country have been vaccinated,” he said.

Firuz Saidov, a researcher at the Centre for Strategic Studies, linked to the Tajik president’s office, added, “We did indeed fail to spot the spread of the polio virus in Tajikistan, and that’s a minus point for our healthcare system.”

**Jahongir Boboev is a pseudonym for journalist in Tajikistan.**

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