

## **Tajikistan: Holed Up at the Border**

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Afghan refugees have been warned that they will not be allowed to cross into Tajikistan.

Thousands of refugees from Afghanistan are expected to make their way to the border with Tajikistan, as the US-led threat of attack looms. But the authorities in Dushanbe have made it clear that they are only willing to help them out on condition they do not cross the frontier.

"Tajikistan will not let a single Afghan refugee into the country," said Tajik president Emomali Rakhmonov when he visited the border with Russian officials last week.

Earlier this week, the UNHCR said that it expected up to 50,000 people to flee in the direction of Tajikistan. The agency - which estimates that, overall, the crisis will uproot some 1.5 million refugees - is seeking 252 million US dollars to cope with the emergency.

Previously the Tajiks have refused Afghan refugees safe haven on financial grounds. Rakhmonov now says his main concern is that national security could be threatened by terrorists slipping in among displaced civilians. Tajikistan's fears have been supported by international observers who have spotted armed men in the Afghan refugee camps across the border.

Dushanbe already has thousands of refugees on its border who escaped from fighting in Afghanistan a year ago.

Rakhmonov is not alone in fearing that terrorism could spill over the border. The secretary-general of the Commonwealth of Independent States' inter-parliamentary assembly, Mikhail Krotov, believes the borders of the alliance should be strengthened "in order to protect our states ... from illegal migration".

In response to anxieties over border security, the chief of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, Ruud Lubbers this week urged all states neighbouring Afghanistan to keep their borders open to accommodate people fleeing the crisis.

A compromise solution is in the offing, however. The Tajik ministry responsible for emergencies is currently working with Russian border guards to arrange for camps to be set up on the Afghan side of the border - on territory currently in the hands of anti-Taliban forces. Viktor Kondrashev, a commander of a Russian border unit, said space was already being allotted.

It is likely that international aid agencies will back the scheme. Seeking out a solution across the frontier is a marked advance on an issue the Tajik authorities have been keen to skirt. Although Tajik foreign minister Talbak Nazarov, speaking in Dushanbe on September 18, told journalists that it was premature to discuss the subject since the precise targets of US strikes were still unknown.

But the Russians believe that refugees will start pouring into Tajikistan as soon as the US bombings begin. "Refugees will become a very real threat if the US goes ahead with its strikes," said Kondrashev. He said he is expecting "thousands" to arrive in the wake of the anticipated attacks, joining those already seeking shelter on islands in the Pyandj river - Tajikistan's natural border with Afghanistan.

An estimated 12,000 Afghan refugees set up camps on islands on the river a year ago, after a Taleban offensive pushed deep into opposition-held territory. Russian experts believe that these refugees may themselves become a problem for Tajikistan as Taleban forces are stationed close by, meaning the area will probably become a US target.

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