

## **Tajikistan Moves Against Militants**

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Dushanbe mounts offensive against Islamic guerrillas following regional criticism of its apparent toleration of the militants.

Tajikistan, under pressure from its neighbours to crack down on an Islamic militant force based in its eastern mountains, earlier this month launched a military offensive against a large armed group linked to the guerrillas.

Army sources said between 25 and 40 Islamic gunmen were killed in the fighting, together with one soldier. Three government troops were wounded. One high ranking Tajik officer, who did not want to be named, said the bodies of members of the militant force, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, were found among the dead.

The sources said the leader of the armed group, former Tajik field commander Abdullo Mullo, had escaped with about 20 irregulars and was heading towards the Kyrgyz border to link up to 5,000 IMU fighters.

The officer said Mullo Abdullo's group had assisted the IMU during its incursion last year into southern Kyrgyzstan and fought against Kyrgyz government troops. He said both groups were also keen to benefit from drug trafficking in eastern regions of Tajikistan.

"Mullo Abdullo is highly respected among the IMU leadership" the officer said. " His fighters and IMU members share the same religious beliefs."

The government in Dushanbe said its action was a response to the refusal of Mullo Abdullo, who fought on the Tajik opposition side during the 92-97 civil war, to reintegrate his forces into the army. This was one of the main conditions in the peace agreement between the government and the Islamic opposition that ended the civil war in Tajikistan.

IMU military leader, Juma Namangani, supported the United Tajik opposition during the civil war.

But military sources said Dushanbe was also signalling to its neighbours that it was prepared to confront the Islamic rebels.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, both engaged in military operations against elements of the IMU force based in Tajikistan, are putting pressure on Dushanbe to comply with regional treaties on combating terrorism and take better control of its domestic security situation.

They also assert that former members of the United Tajik Opposition, UTO, who occupy senior posts in the Dushanbe government, have been supporting the rebels.

The Tajik Emergencies Minister, Mirzo Ziyoev, recently denied his country was sheltering the guerrillas. "There are no Uzbek fighters in the eastern provinces of Tajikistan. And reports that former Tajik opposition members are participating in clashes on Kyrgyz and Uzbek territory are absolutely untrue," he said.

President Rakhmonov of Tajikistan finds himself in a difficult situation. The Dushanbe leadership has committed itself to treaties aimed at combating religious extremism and terrorism, but appears too weak to comply with these obligations, fearing another civil war.

The Tajik military operation was strongly condemned by one of the former leaders of the United Tajik Opposition, UTO, Said Abdullo Nuri, who said the government was fighting against former opposition supporters opposing the reintegration process. Nuri called for the peaceful solutions to such conflicts.

His appeal was supported by the Tajik Emergency Minister Mirzo Ziyoev, another prominent former opposition member. Unconfirmed reports say Ziyoev helped Mullo Abdullo to go into hiding in the Tavildara region, which is controlled by his supporters.

In another public statement, Nuri offered to mediate between Uzbek government and IMU leaders, prompting Uzbek President Islam Karimov to retort that Nuri was "a scoundrel" and that his government would not negotiate with "criminals".

Local analysts believe that UTO and IMU might have the same patrons, who were behind the civil war in Tajikistan and are now looking for other ways of destabilising the region. They say these groups attract supporters by waving the flag of Islam and use instability in the region to secure routes for drug-trafficking.

Ziyoev denies links with the IMU and blames the current crisis on Uzbek President Karimov, "The latest events (the incursions into Uzbekistan and Southern Kyrgyzstan by the IMU) are problems of Uzbekistan. I don't want the Uzbek leadership to hold others responsible for their internal policies. All this is Uzbek internal affairs. It's an attempt to blame others for its own mistakes - this I would describe as the beginning of the crisis in Uzbekistan."

Many regard the public pronouncements of Said Abdullo Nuri and Ziyoev along with the latest operation of yet more proof of a link between the former Tajik opposition and the IMU.

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