

Tajiks, Kyrgyz Grapple With Frontier Issues

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Recent clash shows how niggling resentments can suddenly explode.

When Tajikistan's president Imomali Rahmon holds talks in Kyrgyzstan next week, a recent clash on the border between the two states will be high on the agenda.

The incident took place last month in Vorukh, an area of land that belongs to Tajikistan but is enclosed within Kyrgyzstan's southern Batken region, part of the Fergana Valley that cuts across three Central Asian states.

On April 27, an argument between Vorukh residents and Kyrgyz labourers working on a road escalated into a fight involving several hundred people. Kyrgyz police said several of their nationals were injured, while the Tajiks said two of their police officers needed hospital treatment.

Mamatjan Berdishev, spokesman for the Batken provincial government, explained that Vorukh residents objected to a new 17-kilometre road bypassing the enclave. The road will link the Kyrgyz village of Aksai to its pasture lands, and Berdishev said a decision to go round the enclave was taken after villagers complained that their animals were going missing when they drove them through Vorukh.

"This road will be used only to drive livestock to the grasslands. It isn't asphalted for use by trucks," he said.

Medet Tulegenov, a political analyst from the Kyrgyz capital who visited the area after the incident, told IWPR, that Vorukh residents resented the road because they felt it would compound their problems, which he described as "overpopulation and shortage of agricultural and pasture land". With 30,000 inhabitants, Vorukh is more densely populated than the Kyrgyz areas around it.

"The Tajik nationals living in the enclave see it as a threat, because a road is being built with a barbed-wire fence alongside it," Tulegenov said. "How will they be able to graze their animals?"

On May 4, local government officials from either side of the border agreed a set of measures to provide security and prevent a repetition of conflict.

Simultaneously, experts from a joint Tajik-Kyrgyz government commission held a meeting, but they failed to agree even on the correct maps for discussing issues concerning the enclave. Each side has its own maps, dating from different periods, and these do not agree on where the boundary line around Vorukh should run.

While Berdishev said the maps indicated that the road would run 500 metres inside Kyrgyz territory, a community leader in Vorukh, Abdughaffor Ghoibov, told Asia Plus news agency said the correct maps showed that the area was located on Tajik territory.

Interviewed by IWPR, Ghoibov said that since the clashes, the local Kyrgyz were stopping Tajiks from Vorukh from grazing their animals on shared pasture land.

Berdishev said local officials, both Kyrgyz and Tajik, were doing all they could to calm tensions and ensure people could move across the borders safely. Work on the road had stopped pending a formal demarcation of territory.

The head of Kyrgyzstan's border guards service, Tokon Mamytov, said that while both national governments were committed to finding solutions and agencies like his own worked well with their Tajik counterparts, the same cooperative attitude was not universal.

"Unfortunately the [joint] expert group... did not arrive at an effective outcome. It's now hard for me to say how this problem is going to be resolved," he said.

Tensions in border areas were not new, Mamytov continued, noting that communities had always disagreed about the use of water, pasture and farmlands, particularly during the sowing and harvest seasons.

The difference now, Mamytov said, was that "any conflict assumes a political dimension".

A Tajik border official who asked to remain anonymous agreed on this point. Since the two states became independent in 1991, he said, long-standing frictions between communities had become more formal

disputes between citizens of different states, carrying a higher risk of conflict.

Resentments commonly centre on land ownership, access to pasture, and the use of shared water resources.

Ghoibov, for example, believes that in recent decades, the Kyrgyz living around Vorukh have “laid claim to substantial parts of our land and behave like its rightful owners”. A common complaint among Kyrgyz residents of Batken, meanwhile, is that Tajiks have been buying up houses and land, creating the risk that whole areas could be reassigned to Tajikistan when the border demarcation is finally agreed.

Such frictions become more likely when so much of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border is not clearly defined.

The Tajik border official said there were still 80 areas under dispute. “The situation is most tense in the Tajik enclave of Vorukh,” he added.

Events in Vorukh unfolded in a very similar way to a clash that took place in January in Sokh, another enclave in southern Kyrgyzstan, but belonging to Uzbekistan rather than Tajikistan. Once again, the trouble started when residents confronted Kyrgyz workers, in this case laying an electricity line.

Because the Kyrgyz government’s relationship with Uzbekistan is worse than that with Tajikistan, the response was a lockdown of border crossings that has not yet fully eased. (See **Enclave Issues Challenge Uzbek, Kyrgyz Leaders**.) By contrast, after the more recent Kyrgyz-Tajik incident, officials from both countries made efforts to keep border checkpoints open and allow traffic to move freely.

Mamytov said the main institutions in Kyrgyzstan – the president, government, parliament, local authorities and border agency – all wanted to see issues with Tajikistan resolved.

The key to success, he said, was compromise and gradual solutions, rather than “just banging your fist on the table”.

“Everything must be 50-50. If you concede 70 per cent here, the other side must give 70 per cent somewhere else,” he added.

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