

Tensions Mount on Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border

Author: [IWPR](#)

While Bishkek and Tashkent continue to downplay frictions, the increasing

By Sultan Jumagulov in Bishkek (RCA No. 138, 16-Aug-02)

Uzbek border guards have been accused of firing shots at two cars driven by

Kyrgyz citizens in the southern Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, which borders

Uzbekistan's Fergana area.

While one Fergana official told IWPR that he is not aware of the incident,

which is alleged to have taken place on August 13, the Batken authorities

have lodged a protest with their Uzbek counterparts.

The shooting claim is only the latest in a long line of incidents involving

the two republics along their still-disputed boundary.

A Kyrgyz shepherd was recently admitted to hospital with severe concussion

after being detained by Uzbek border guards. Talant Khaliev and his brother

Talas were held on suspicion of stealing wire from the barbed wire fence

that divides the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan from Fergana in Uzbekistan.

Their mother claims they were seized while tending their cattle and were

violently beaten before the authorities intervened.

Gulamjan Mamajanov, deputy head of administration of the Aravan district in

Osh, adds that 15,000 Kyrgyz som (around 350 US dollars) in damages had to be paid before the men were released, despite no evidence they were involved in the theft of the wire, which poverty-stricken local residents often sell for scrap.

Uzbekistan has instigated an increasingly harsh regime of "border security" in recent years, including the ongoing installation of an 800-km long fence between the countries.

This has been erected even though the official boundary between the two states is still to be agreed, and more than 130 disputed sections remain a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Uzbek authorities argue that such measures, together with pro-active policing, are necessary to stop the movement of Islamic extremists who have been known to carry out operations in South Kyrgyzstan. "We have to defend ourselves, that is why we did it," said a Fergana official.

However, more than ten Kyrgyz citizens have been killed by Uzbek air-strikes and landmines since 1999, and two more people were shot dead by border guards in the Batken region this winter.

An increasing number of allegations of brutality against civilians are being levelled against the border guards. Tashkent has so far refused to press charges, claiming those involved are acting according to the law and

military code.

While protesting such treatment at diplomatic levels, Bishkek officials are keen to emphasise that such reports of violence are local in nature and will not affect wider relations between the states.

An official Uzbek expert, who did not want to be named, tried to downplay the concern of the Kyrgyz authorities in the border regions and denied such clashes would jeopardise relations between the two nations. "It is like two families who live in the same house and their children sometimes quarrel. It does not mean that the parents will get dragged into conflict," he told

IWPR.

Kyrgyz journalist Beken Nazaraliev believes that Bishkek has adopted an "indifferent attitude" rather than stepping in to prevent Uzbek security forces turning weapons against civilians. "They appear more concerned with enforcing internal order after recent upheavals in southern border areas," said Nazaraliev.

The anti-government protests in the Jalal-Abad and Osh regions of Kyrgyzstan over spring and summer saw six protesters shot by Kyrgyz police and culminated in the government being forced to stand down. While the

large-scale demonstrations now seem to have been dispersed, President Askar

Akaev's administration is still keeping a close eye on events.

Kyrgyz parliamentary deputy Dooronbek Sadyrbaev fears that such a refocusing

of priorities will corrode the republic's territorial integrity. "Our

authorities have thrown all of their force against the internal opposition,

thus weakening our external borders," he said. "Such a miscalculation may

turn into major losses for the state."

He points to the case of ten Uzbek citizens who recently slipped across the

border and allegedly beat up a number of Kyrgyz citizens and stole their

valuables.

Asked about this incident, Kyrgyz law enforcement officials said it was the

result of a business disagreement between citizens of both countries, and

several Uzbek citizens have been detained in Kyrgyzstan amid continuing

investigations.

Journalist Marip Taichabarov, who regularly covers Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations,

says that Tashkent's border guards and customs officers currently feel

themselves to be the masters of the situation. He argued that Bishkek needs

to take back some of the initiative.

"Only by adopting adequate measures towards Uzbekistan, such as the

installation of fences and the creation of checkpoints, will the Bishkek

authorities achieve balance on the problematic border," he said.

However, Kyrgyz army general and parliamentary deputy Ismail Isakov fears

that recent treaties ceding some disputed land could trigger larger-scale

aggressive stances by neighbouring states.

"Our political leadership has created a precedent, having given up our

territories to China. This has provided an opportunity for other neighbours

to push their border claims aggressively," he told IWPR.

Akaev recently declared 2003 to be the year of Kyrgyz statehood. If he is to

preserve and strengthen the country's sovereignty, he now appears to face

some hard choices internally as well as externally.

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