

## **Unclear Kyrgyz-Kazak Border Makes Life Tough for Villagers**

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Border difficulties affecting Kyrgyz villagers blamed on overzealous frontier guards and on Kyrgyzstan's failure to ratify a demarcation agreement.

Most of the long and winding frontier between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan is a picture of peace and tranquility.

With a border drawn mainly on natural geographic lines, the two countries – the Goliath of Central Asia and its much smaller southern neighbour – have avoided the kind of frontier disputes that have bedevilled Kyrgyzstan's relations with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

But at two points on the 980-km long border, unresolved matters remain, and Kyrgyz villagers complain of routine harassment by Kazak border guards.

One flashpoint is the village of Stepnoye, in the Chui region of northern Kyrgyzstan, just north of the capital, Bishkek.

Here about one thousand hectares of land belonging to the village lies in a wedge of Kyrgyz territory that protrudes into Kazakstan. About 800 of the 1,200 villagers have fields in this area, but to reach their land, they have to cross the highway running between the Kazak cities of Almaty and Taraz.

The catch is that the road counts as Kazak territory, and it has a checkpoint on it.

As local land surveyor Yury Nikolaev explained, "Kazak border guards delay villagers going to their fields and demand to see their passports, so conflicts arise as a result. Not all the villagers take their passports because they believe it's their territory and it shouldn't be necessary."

Aydarbek Asambaev is among the villagers who has had trouble with the Kazak border guards while returning home from the fields.

"The guards ordered me to go through their checkpoint, and I refused," he said. "Why should we go through [border] posts on our own territory?"

"After a discussion, I showed my passport and they let me pass. But I got the impression that the border guards from Kazakstan don't know where the borders lie and regard the land across the road as their own."

Other villagers have also complained about the Kazak officials' high-handed ways, and especially about a mobile frontier unit that patrols the Almaty-Taraz highway.

Kazbek Semenov, another resident of Stepnoye, recalled, "Once they said I'd crossed the border and took

away my passport. Then they ordered me to pay a fine of 17,000 tenge [about 140 US dollars], allegedly for breaching the border.”

Only following the intervention of the village policeman was Semenov able to recover his passport without paying the stiff penalty the Kazaks had demanded.

“After that, I’ve tried not to go to the field very often, only during sowing and harvesting,” he said. “But I do have to go to fertilise crops, check how the seedlings are coming up and see whether there is damage caused by cattle.”

Almaz Tashpaev, chief of police in the Chui regional administration, says he has received countless complaints from villagers in Stepnoye that they are unable to go freely to their fields and gather the harvest.

Apart from complaining of unnecessary border checks, the villagers also accuse Kazak border guards of seizing stray livestock, and only returning it in exchange for money or following Kyrgyz police intervention.

#### LACK OF CLEAR BOUNDARIES TO BLAME

Kyrgyz politicians and experts say the blame for the situation does not lie solely at the feet of Kazakhstan’s frontier service; their own side is also at fault for failing to ratify a border agreement.

An agreement on the Kyrgyz-Kazak state border was signed by the two governments back in 2001 and has been ratified by the Kazak parliament. However, the parliament of Kyrgyzstan has refused to approve the agreement, claiming it is disadvantageous.

But another important factor has been the political turmoil that has gripped Kyrgyzstan and consumed parliament’s energies for the past two years.

When Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev visited Bishkek in April, he urged legislators to ratify the agreement, saying that apart from offering a comprehensive solution, “this is also a matter of trust – a matter of the future of our countries”.

Salamat Alamanov, head of the Kyrgyz government’s department for regional affairs, says opposition parties played on nationalist fears about the border deal and stirred up hostility to the agreement.

“Some politicians have talked about only those areas that were to be given to Kazakhstan and said nothing about those that were going to Kyrgyzstan,” he said, referring to proposed exchanges of territory.

As a result, Alamanov continued, “our parliament is extremely sensitive about the border, whereas in reality there were no problems. When the border lines were drawn, there were mutual exchanges of land so that neither side would lose out.”

Returning to the Stepnoye dispute, Alamanov insisted the problem was not only the demarcation of borders but also the poor manner in which situations were handled on the ground.

“The frontier officials in Stepnoye need to meet and agree on a simplified procedure for letting our villagers across [to their land],” he said. “It’s just not correct to claim that one of the major causes of border conflicts is non-demarcated borders.”

Some steps to ease the situation in Stepnoye have taken place and according to Almaz Tashpaev of the Chui regional administration, Kyrgyz and Kazak border officials recently agreed to allow local residents to cross showing other forms of ID rather than their passports.

Village head Nikolay Budko clarified the terms of the deal, “During the spring and autumn harvests, we will give out special certificates to villagers who have land plots over the road so they can go to the fields without being challenged.”

But whether Kazak frontier guards are aware of the new arrangement is far from clear. Sabit Beishenbetov, a sergeant with the Kazak unit stationed near Stepnoye insisted that as far as he knew, Kyrgyz citizens could cross the border only with passports, and other documents were not valid.

#### VILLAGERS TAKE THE LONG WAY ROUND

Problems on the Kyrgyz-Kazak border are not limited to the village of Stepnoye, or to Chui region. Similar disputes simmer away in the Talas region, which also adjoins Kazakhstan.

Here, as in Stepnoye, there are frequent complaints that livestock are impounded if they stray into Kazak territory, and herdsmen have been detained.

In this case, it is a slice of Kazak territory that juts into Kyrgyzstan. Villagers in Kaynar and Koksay in the Karabuura district, on one side of the “peninsula”, say Kazak border guards will not let them drive farm vehicles across to reach 1,200 hectares of farmland which lie on the other side.

They have to take a long detour to reach their land without crossing Kazak territory, and complain that the route takes them through rough terrain which even tractors find difficult going

#### RIVER “MIGRATING” INTO KAZAKSTAN

According to Chui police chief Tashpaev, the simplest solution for most border disputes between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan would be a final, definitive agreement involving land swaps where necessary.

In the case of Stepnoye, this would mean that Kyrgyzstan would surrender the fields lying on the far side of the Almaty-Taraz road, and receive an equivalent slice of land closer to the village.

But petty disputes and a tendency on either side to view any agreement as a sell-out get in the way of a final deal.

In Stepnoye, part of the border follows the course of the river Chu. When the river overflows and washes away its banks, both Kazak and Kyrgyz sides try to shore them up more or less where they were in order to hold onto their territory.

But from a Kyrgyz point of view, annual floods between 2002 and 2006 have shifted the course of the river markedly, leading to the loss of about 500 hectares of land. Some argue that this “washed away” land must be factored into any final settlement.

Cholponbek Turusbekov, an official with the Kyrgyz frontier service, says joint patrols in controversial areas might offer an interim solution.

But he fears conflicts will continue to arise as long as citizens on either side of the border remain unaware of the exact course of the border.

The failure to sign off on the agreement with Kazakhstan has not improved things, he argues, adding, “There is only one way out - to ratify the border.”

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