

## **Uzbekistan: Calls for End to Mine Policy Rejected**

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Tashkent is to continue mining its borders even though the threat from Islamic militants appears to have diminished significantly.

The Uzbek authorities have no plans to remove landmines planted along the country's frontiers with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, despite mounting civilian casualties and repeated protests from neighbouring states, a government source told IWPR.

Tashkent's uncompromising policy has claimed the lives of dozens of villagers in recent months. In one incident, nine residents of Farab in Tajikistan were killed by a device while returning from market in Urgut, Uzbekistan.

Dushanbe estimates 40 Tajik civilians have been killed and 42 injured by landmines over the last couple of years. The Tashkent authorities refuse to give figures for casualties among their own nationals. A spokesman for the defence ministry denied anyone had been injured or killed. But unofficial sources put the number at several dozen.

Most of those who've fallen victim to the landmines have been trying to cross the border to trade - a smaller number have been frontier farmers tending to their livestock and land. Two teenagers from the village of Vatkan in Urgut district died a few months ago while out searching for some stray cows.

Negotiating minefields has become something of a routine for people living in the region. The nine Tajiks had cleared a path to Urgut market using a long piece of wire. Unfortunately, they weren't to know that Uzbek border guards had rearranged the mines prior to them returning home.

The Tashkent government began mining the borders after an incursion by Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, militants into the Sukhandarya region in August 2000.

Some locals support the policy, which they see as a powerful safeguard against possible raids by Muslim extremists. But the majority oppose the strategy, especially after the death of the IMU leader, Juma Namangani, in Afghanistan in December 2001. They say the danger of attack is now much reduced, but the continued presence of the munitions puts at risk impoverished local people dependent on cross-border trade.

Most locals believe the minefields are there to protect the authorities and not them. "The militants wouldn't touch the locals. They're after the people in power," said one villager who has lost a relative in a mine accident. He claimed IMU militants camped in the Sukhandarya region before the Uzbek government clampdown had got along fine with villagers.

Despite the fact that landmines have killed only civilians and no guerrillas, the Uzbek authorities are determined to persevere with the deterrent.

"After the Surkhandarya events, Uzbekistan became very much aware of the threat posed by Islamic militants encamped across the border," explained an Uzbek border checkpoint commander. "Tajikistan was not doing anything about the IMU bases on its territory. It is notoriously hard to ensure adequate border safeguards in the mountains, so the government just went ahead and mined the whole area."

Another local commander said he was sorry civilians had been injured and killed, but that this was ultimately the fault of the locals themselves. " Residents were briefed. We have papers signed by them to confirm they know the area is mined," he said.

The landmine issue was not raised at the Central Asian summit in Tashkent last December, despite the success of the US-led campaign in Afghanistan, the fall of the Taleban, the death of Namangani and the apparent reduction of the threat posed by Muslim militants.

But for the time being at least, those living near the Uzbek frontiers with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan have little option but to put up with the mine threat. The death toll is sure to rise.

Malik Mansur is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Tashkent

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