

War of Words Over Frontier Killing

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Kyrgyzstan angered by apparent impunity of Uzbek border guards who shot and killed a civilian.

Diplomatic tensions are running high between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan following the killing of a civilian on their common border last week.

Adyljan Urkinbaev, a 21-year-old citizen of Kyrgyzstan, was shot dead by Uzbek frontier guards in the town of Karasuu – which straddles the border – at about six in the evening on July 16.

His death exemplified the growing problems facing people who want to cross the border to shop or visit relatives.

Urkinbaev earned a living by taking people across a home-made footbridge over the river Shahrihan-Sai which divides the town, and demarcates this part of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border.

This unusual trade sprang up after December 2002, when the Tashkent authorities dismantled a major bridge, making it impossible for people to cross. The official reason was to impose quarantine restrictions to contain a flu epidemic, but locals saw it as a heavy-handed tactic designed to stop Uzbeks crossing into Kyrgyz territory to buy goods at a market there.

The Uzbek authorities have made it much harder to cross into Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since they imposed huge customs charges on imports last year, inadvertently encouraging Uzbeks to shop more cheaply just over the border.

The Uzbek closure has had a particularly big impact on Karasuu.

“Karasuu is a single town separated by a river in the middle,” Abdusattar Shayatov, mayor of the Kyrgyz part of the town, told IWPR. “One half is in Kyrgyzstan, the other in Uzbekistan. And virtually all the town’s residents are related to each other. But in order to get to the other part of town, people now need to take a detour of 40 kilometres, although it’s only 10 metres across the river.”

He added that many people drown trying to make the crossing, “One dies almost every day.”

Locals have rigged up improvised bridges and rope crossings across the Shahrikhan-Sai river. Three or four men work at each one, leading people across for 10-15 soms, about 25-35 US cents. On average, 50 or 60 people pass through each crossing point every day.

All this goes on under the gaze of the Uzbek border guards who are supposed to have sealed off the border. As one local man, Mahamadjan Kamilov, told IWPR, “The ‘ferryman’, who are mainly Kyrgyz citizens, reach agreement with Uzbek border guards to allow unhindered passage for their clients, and in return the troops get a third of their takings.”

On the day Urkinbaev was killed, the unofficial guides approached the Uzbek soldiers for permission to take

eight women across. But although the frontier guards had already taken their cut from the women, they stopped them and searched their bags, demanding more money.

After arguing fruitlessly with the soldiers, the 'ferryman' retreated to their side of the border and began to throw stones at them. At that moment, several shots rang out from the Uzbek side. A bullet hit Urkinbaev in the stomach.

The dead man came from a poor family, and supported his elderly mother and two sick brothers with the money he made. His family are too timid to protest out loud, but have written to the local Kyrgyz authorities. "We think that whatever the authorities do will be right thing," said Urkinbaev's brother, who suffers from tuberculosis.

On July 18, the Kyrgyz interior minister handed a formal note of protest to Uzbek ambassador Alisher Salahiddinov. Ministry official Almaz Idrisov told IWPR that it was too soon to talk about charging the soldier who killed Urkinbaev, "Uzbekistan has not yet responded in official terms, and we are awaiting the reaction of the authorities there."

The Uzbek interior ministry has in fact made an official statement about the incident. A copy of it given to IWPR at Uzbekistan's embassy in Bishkek said, "The Uzbek side believes that full responsibility for the incident that brought about the death of a Kyrgyz citizen lies with the Kyrgyz side."

The Uzbek version of events, given in the statement, is that following "an illegal crossing of the border by a group of up to 40 Kyrgyz citizens, and an attack on an Uzbek border detachment, one of the attackers died from a gunshot wound".

The statement says the Kyrgyz used Molotov cocktails, sticks and chains to attack the soldiers, injuring four.

"The inaction of the Kyrgyz authorities and border services is perplexing, since they take no action to prevent such incidents," it said.

Police in Kyrgyzstan disagree. They are treating Urkinbaev's death as a crime, and have opened a case. Colonel Erkin Esenaliev, deputy police chief in the Osh region, says his officers are being left to deal with cases which should properly be handled by the Kyrgyz military or the border guards.

"The problem is that our border effectively does not have the status of a state frontier, and is considered to be only administrative. And at present, [it] is practically unmarked. Kyrgyz guards are not actually protecting it," said Esenaliev.

The Uzbek troops have gained a reputation for rough treatment of the civilians who want to get across the border.

"The slightest excuse is all it takes for their semi-literate soldiers to reach for their weapons," said Azimjan Askarov, human rights activist from Jalalabad in southern Kyrgyzstan. "So it's not surprising that Uzbek border guards shoot Kyrgyz citizens with impunity."

The Kyrgyz interior ministry refused to tell IWPR how often such violent incidents take place, saying this was classified information.

Even this tragic death is unlikely to stop Karasuu's 'ferryman' from doing a brisk trade in border crossings. Many were angered when Urkinbaev died, but as one of them later told IWPR, "We will go on working here, it's our source of income. And what can we do? If we protest, we will lose even the money we have."

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