

Would External Intervention Help Kyrgyz Situation?

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As activists call for military intervention in southern Kyrgyzstan, some regional commentators warn that this could make the conflict worse.

An open letter from Uzbek human rights groups, published by online news outlets on June 21, urged United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to take action to deploy UN peacekeeping forces to end what they called a “genocide” of ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.

Ethnic clashes broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks on July 10-11 and lasted several days in the Osh and Jalalabad regions before security forces were able to assert a degree of control. The bloodshed displaced 400,000 people, of whom about 80,000 sought refuge in Uzbekistan.

The Kyrgyz authorities acknowledge that the conflict was along ethnic lines, and say over 250 people died, while some estimates put the figure much higher.

International humanitarian organisations say over one million people were affected by the conflict.

The fighting raised serious concerns in neighbouring Uzbekistan, and local human rights activists have urged both the Tashkent government and the international community to take action to defuse the conflict.

Rights activists wrote to the UN and NATO asking them to consider military intervention to halt the attacks in southern Kyrgyzstan.

“We believe the situation in Kyrgyzstan calls for immediate, international peace enforcement operations,” they said in their letter.

On June 16, the non-government Expert Working Group wrote to Uzbek president Islam Karimov asking him to call an emergency meeting of Central Asian heads of states.

“The talks should focus on the establishment of a deterrent force,” said Sukhrobjon Ismoilov, coordinator of the group. “Uzbekistan should insist on moving its troops into a buffer zone so that they can help the refugees return safely to their places of residence, in conjunction with Kyrgyzstan’s military and police.”

Political analysts interviewed by NBCentralAsia worry, however, that if external forces became involved, it could spark more conflict.

“What happened in southern Kyrgyzstan is an internal conflict that should be resolved by that state by itself,” said says Orozbek Moldaliev, head of the Bishkek-based programme Politics, Religion, and Security in Central Asia.

“Why should Uzbekistan or international organisations get involved? Inappropriate action, even if taken with good intentions, could provoke another round of violence.”

Rovshan Ibrahimov, heads of International Relations Department at Baku University, says that while the Uzbek activists want to help, the action for which they are pressing could exacerbate the situation.

Ibrahimov says his caution about states intervening in their neighbours’ conflicts is based on his study of similar ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus and in Kosovo.

“We must not forget that this is happening to citizens of Kyrgyzstan, even if they are ethnic Uzbeks,” he said. “Words and statements, to say nothing of a military deployment, can only aggravate developments in Kyrgyzstan.”

Ibrahimov says a military intervention plan would be more acceptable if it came from more disinterested states like Russia or Kazakstan. “If it was their initiative, I think that Uzbekistan would join in any plan to resolve the problem, but at the moment, it doesn’t have a right to intervene.”

Farhod Tolipov, a political scientist in Tashkent, says the Uzbek government finds itself in an invidious position. It has dual interests as a neighbour of Kyrgyzstan and a country with an interest in its fellow-Uzbeks. Therefore, whichever way it reacts, it is likely to face criticism.

“Failure to intervene will show Uzbekistan in an unfavourable light, since it might look like it isn’t doing enough to protect the Uzbeks in Osh and Jalalabad. But if it does intervene, there will be others that accuse

it of interfering in Kyrgyzstan's domestic affairs, which would ratchet up the conflict."

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