



# BULLETIN

No. 97 (173) • June 25, 2010 • © PISM

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## Ethnic Massacres in Kyrgyzstan: Causes and International Reactions

by Tomasz Sikorski

*The pogroms of Kyrgyzstani citizens of Uzbek nationality by their ethnic Kyrgyz neighbors were the gravest ethnicity-based massacre in Central Asia since the break-up of the Soviet Union. They have demonstrated disinterest of Russia, China, the U.S. and the EU in the country's situation, in addition to revealing the weakness of the region's security architecture. Russia will very likely dodge responsibility for stabilizing the situation, which would only entail enormous costs and risks. The situation will very likely calm down by itself, although the problems underlying the conflict will remain unresolved.*

Between 10 and 13 June 2010, the southern Kyrgyzstani cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad witnessed a series of pogroms of Uzbek inhabitants at the hands of their Kyrgyz neighbors. The official reports so far speak of 223 deaths and some 2,000 people wounded, but the actual losses may prove to be much higher. Refugee numbers topped 400,000, with some 100,000 leaving the country for neighbouring Uzbekistan. This is the gravest ethnicity-based massacre in Central Asia since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the most serious upheaval in Kyrgyzstan since the fall of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev last April.

**Background.** The southern part of Kyrgyzstan has to cope with much more severe problems than the north. In the districts of Osh and Jalal-Abad poverty, economic stagnation, rural overpopulation and social conflicts overlap with ethnic divisions (with Uzbeks accounting for a third of these areas' inhabitants). In 1990, brutal massacres of Uzbeks in Osh were put down by security forces. Over the next two decades (especially after 2005), the Uzbek community in independent Kyrgyzstan was subjected to discrimination in public life, but at the same time it was relatively active in economic life and strongly represented among the so-called bazaar middle class.

The situation destabilized after the downfall of President Bakiyev in the wake of mass demonstrations and street fighting on 6–7 April 2010. The protests were much weaker in the south of the country, where takeover by the opposition came later. While in the north the situation relatively calmed down, the south was the scene of skirmishes, mostly between Bakiyev's supporters (numerous in the region) and opponents. Most Uzbeks steered clear of these conflicts, but some pressed the authorities for access to public life. This activism fuelled enmity among their Kyrgyz neighbors.

The pogrom that started on the night of 10 June might indeed have been provoked by supporters of the ousted President Bakiyev, with the intention of destabilizing the situation in the country before the constitutional referendum planned for 27 June. On the other hand, Osh is Central Asia's major drug trafficking centre with strong organized crime. Additionally, in the aftermath of the April events, civilian population gained access to huge quantities of weapons and ammunition and the pre-referendum climate was conducive to the emergence of armed militant groups.

The Kyrgyzstani security forces proved incapable of bringing the upheavals under control, and some ethnic Kyrgyz members of the security forces actually joined the militants. In conditions marked by omnipresent poverty and corruption, some Uzbeks even happened to be extorted for money in return for protection and safe transportation to the border. Bishkek's inability to restore order reflected not so much its indolence as an absence of even minimal effectiveness of the security forces. In these circumstances, on 12 June acting president Roza Otunbayeva called on Russia to intervene militarily in order to put down the riots.

**Russia's Position.** Russia's actions so far have been confined to reinforcing its garrison in the base of Kant in northern Kyrgyzstan and providing humanitarian assistance (taking a group of the

pogroms' heavily wounded victims to hospitals). Otunbayeva's request was rejected, citing unwillingness to interfere in the internal affairs of another country. Neither were any binding decisions about the intervention taken at the 14 June session of security secretaries of member states from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), when Russia itself did not show any signs of activeness.

The necessity of taking a stand on Uzbek massacres in Kyrgyzstan has placed Russia in an awkward position: on the one hand Kyrgyzstan lies in what is considered by Russia as its sphere of "privileged interests" (which is why Russia is critical of the U.S. military base in Manas, near Bishkek), but, on the other, assuming responsibility for internal security in Kyrgyzstan would involve huge costs and high risks. A possible deployment of troops to fight armed groups would almost certainly bring about bloodspilling on a mass scale and enormous image losses.

Russian troops' deployment, whether or not under the CSTO banner, would also provoke a very negative reaction from Uzbekistan, which has been demonstrating for years scepticism towards both the Russian military presence in its neighbourhood and any deepening of military cooperation within the CSTO (between 1999 and 2006, Uzbekistan actually stayed out of that organization). Even Uzbekistan's obstruction of hypothetical actions by the CSTO cannot be ruled out, which would put in doubt the organisation's credibility. With all this taken into account, Russia's position should be described as playing for time, where an argument over troops deployment is being prolonged until the situation calms down by itself, making such an option redundant. It is possible, that Russia may actually finalize talks with Kyrgyzstan on setting up another military base in the south of the country (the idea itself was already agreed upon in August 2009) although this could hardly be considered as response to ethnic massacres.

**Uzbekistan's Reaction** was restrained. The country opened for two days its border with Kyrgyzstan (closed after the April events), accepting some of the refugees. The problem which the Tashkent authorities confronted was their distrust in Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks, enjoying (with the exception of the 1990 and 2010 events) a far greater extent of freedom in religion, business (bazaars) or even politics than their compatriots in semi-totalitarian Uzbekistan. Moreover, some in the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan are refugees from the Andijan massacre perpetrated in 2005 by Uzbekistan's security forces on protesters. That is why the Tashkent government, afraid of the diasporas' destabilizing role, is unwilling to offer them shelter for long. Uzbekistan's military intervention is unlikely either, and the factors behind this restraint are similar to Russia's motives. Additionally, it is very unlikely that Uzbekistan could be asked for help by the Kyrgyzstani authorities, given the Kyrgyz-Uzbek animosities.

**Reaction from other international actors** was confined to sending humanitarian assistance or issuing statements. The U.S. focused on the security of its own base, Manas, which is of key importance for the Afghan operation. Both China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization stayed passive. Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan-led OSCE were not particularly active either, largely reflecting unwillingness to assume responsibility for a peripheral area.

Given this passivity of states and international organizations in charge of security, it is safe to predict that there will be no intervention, and that the unrest, already diminishing, will die out on its own. But in the longer run, a repeat of recent events is very likely. This is because the underlying causes of the conflict are there to stay, while the regional security architecture has revealed its weaknesses.

**Recommendations for the European Union.** In the present circumstances, an independent action towards regional stabilization led by the EU, or its member states, is hardly a realistic prospect. Immediate measures of a humanitarian nature do make sense, reducing the extent of humanitarian catastrophe by channelling assistance to the most needy. In the longer run, though, it will be advisable to increase the EU's engagement in Kyrgyzstan by directing greater resources to projects carried out under the EU's Strategy for Central Asia. The sectors with potential for growth include water-power engineering, education and development assistance. Measures aimed at improving the Kyrgyzstan's social situation provide the only effective means of country's security improvement available to the EU.