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# KYRGYZSTAN: ENSURING SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS REQUIRED TO PUT COUNTRY BACK ON COURSE

The official mourning period for the dead and wounded in southern Kyrgyzstan has ended, but inter-ethnic tensions, fears and human rights abuses haunt this area, particularly its Uzbek citizens. Some 75,000 people remain displaced. Thousands of Uzbeks have sought refuge in neighboring countries or have migrated to Russia. Kyrgyzstan's interim government must act to ensure physical and legal security for all citizens and end impunity for those responsible for attacks, arbitrary arrests, detention, kidnappings, extortion and intimidation. The government must restore justice and tolerance for all or risk its economic, social and political development as central Asia's leading democracy.

## BRUTALITY AND BLOODSHED

In mid-June 2010, attacks by unknown assailants triggered violence between majority Kyrgyz and minority Uzbek communities, particularly in Osh, Jalal-Abad and Bazarborgon. Multiple explanations for the origin of bloodletting and widespread destruction (including almost 3,000 buildings) include a variety of causes or conspiracy theories: a power vacuum and weak national governance; revenge by deposed President Bakiyev and followers; ethnic discrimination; entrenched rural poverty vs. urban success; economic disparities between ethnicities; corruption; out of control drug cartels/criminal gangs; weak civil society institutions; external geo-political actors; and religious extremists.

Whatever the catalyst, there was little official effort to stop the carnage. Witnesses repeatedly pointed to elements of security and military forces as participating in the violence, citing evidence of advance planning, availability of weapons, and the presence of armored personnel carriers, trucks, snipers and teams of looters and arsonists. Refugees International heard numerous accounts of unprovoked killings, shootings, stabbings, looting and burning. Brutal gender-based violence enflamed tensions in a culture of traditional family and religious views.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Kyrgyzstan's national and local governments must improve control and oversight of security operations in the south to end intimidation, arbitrary detention, arrests, beatings and extraction of bribes from Uzbeks or other citizens and fully cooperate with OSCE police advisors and UN human rights and protection workers.
- The government and aid agencies should undertake reconstruction and redevelopment in close consultation with local residents to enable the U.S. and other donor governments to support rapid rebuilding of homes and schools.
- Kyrgyzstan, with the support of UNHCR and civil society organizations, should rapidly supply national identity cards, passports and other documents to those affected by the recent unrest and to residents previously lacking such documents.
- OSCE should quickly train and deploy its first 52 police advisors. The U.S. and other donors should support expansion of UN and other international programs providing protection, legal advice and humanitarian aid to the country's displaced and traumatized.

“For four days people came to kill us,” said M. “They burned our houses and if they returned and something remained, they burned it again. Our cattle were taken and burned.” “They robbed our houses... and at the border we saw with our own eyes men who had been burned and we met girls who had been violated,” A. said. One wife, still in shock, witnessed her husband going outside to protect his property then being attacked, repeatedly stabbed and finally murdered with an axe blow. Such sights now haunt her and her community.

In the Shark area of Karasuu, a group of twelve women told how the violence affected them. One husband who went to the bazaar was told, “You shouldn’t come here. You are Uzbek.” One woman’s son had been covered with gasoline and burned, while another’s son was shot by a sniper. A third woman’s husband was kidnapped and is still missing. The women want their sons and husbands to hide because they are at risk of false arrest, kidnapping or attack. Many women from destroyed Uzbek mahalas are afraid to go to the market or to a hospital fearing the presence of armed men or hostile attendants.

At a mahala in Osh’s Ak-Tilek area, a mother explained that her family had built their home on an open field more than 50 years ago. Stepping through mounds of ash and broken glass toward the only standing wall, she cried, “My 12-year-old daughter who witnessed these events cannot speak. Please tell the world about discrimination in Kyrgyzstan.”

A weary 90-year-old woman sitting outside her burned farm home near Basarkorgon told us, “The tents are very hot. My three sons had houses and now we all live here in tents. They are afraid to go out and water their crops... I know a woman whose sons were taken to prison without evidence. First our houses were damaged. Now they are taking our children. When we hear any noise, we are afraid.”

Displaced Kyrgyz women are also fearful. Some were attacked or witnessed violence and burning. They live in government buildings or temporary shelters with security, but they prefer to travel in groups fearing Uzbek taunts or even attacks. Some were resisting returning to neighborhoods where they were the minority and they wanted help to move.

## **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE**

At the height of the displacement 100,000 women, children, elderly and wounded persons had sought refugee protection in Uzbekistan, and some 500 fled to Tajikistan.

Returnees from Uzbekistan uniformly praised the care, hospitality and respect they received during their brief stay, many noting they even received food for their return.

Though brief, the humane response of Uzbekistan and its citizens’ outpouring of contributions provided safety, security and a full range of humanitarian assistance to those admitted as refugees. Uzbekistan invited the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to assist the refugees and to witness their tales of repression, abuse and sexual violence. The UN, ICRC, non-governmental organizations and the international community attempted a timely response to the needs of the refugees and the displaced, quickly mounting an international appeal and deploying staff and programs to affected areas as soon as access was possible.

But soon the government of Uzbekistan, seemingly overwhelmed, reached an agreement with Kyrgyzstan’s President for returns to begin. Kyrgyz officials were invited to visit the refugee camps and invite people home, offering promises of security and assistance. They promised a stabilized situation at home and easy re-entry even for those without documents or passports, while citing the need of the refugees to vote in the June 27 constitutional referendum.

The camps were emptied by June 25. International observers in both countries told RI that the returns were largely voluntary. Refugees, however, told RI that stories and rumors circulating suggested that this was the last chance to return home or risk permanent separation from husbands and sons, the loss of their property and denial of any future humanitarian aid.

Those who hesitated, unsure of their safety, were pressed into heading back to Kyrgyzstan prematurely. One man explained, “My female relatives went to Uzbekistan. They were physically forced to come back and had to sign a form saying their return was voluntary.” Another refugee had to wait several days at the border. “I spent five days in Uzbekistan but then had to come back because Kyrgyzstan officials said we had to. There were people with guns by the buses.” Another told of boarding a bus ostensibly to go to a new camp only to be taken against her wishes to the border.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan deserve international recognition for upholding the rights of persecuted victims to seek asylum. These governments should be encouraged to continue their leadership in observing international law and in prohibiting the forced return of refugees to situations of grave risk or persecution. Uzbekistan should consider inviting

UNHCR to assist in building their country's emergency humanitarian response capacity and their ability to care for and protect refugees. Hopefully, neighboring countries will follow these good examples and open their borders to those in need of temporary protection and safety.

## RETURNEES AND DISPLACED AT RISK

Many of the 75,000 ethnic Uzbek families who returned from Uzbekistan remain displaced, with their homes, businesses and livelihoods destroyed. Some displaced families never left the country, but fled to the homes of relatives and friends in areas unaffected by the violence. Initially, RI found some Uzbek families living in small tent encampments close to their damaged homes. The government then ordered that their tents be erected on their properties. RI watched UN-supplied tents being dismantled despite the protests of residents that their homes were dangerous and unfit for habitation, filled with dead animals, broken glass, torn metal and debris. The UN began funding NGOs to assist traumatized families to remove hazards and debris.

Many of the displaced are living with host families, often neighbors or relatives. RI visited host families aiding 40 to 60 people ranging in age from two to 80. One guest said, "Thank God this house remains. The family who owns it is a poor family but they have a roof and they are willing to share it." said one guest. Another displaced person who was concerned that the government wants to replace destroyed Uzbek homes in Osh with high-rise buildings said, "This woman is kind to accept us, but we want to live in our own house...and we have this right."

At another house a family of ten shared their space with seven additional families. The host, whose son was shot on the first day of the violence, felt he had to do something. He said, "They were in trouble, and I should help." Many displaced explained their first assistance came not from the international community or the government, but from neighbors giving food, clothing, dishes and bedding. Describing this generosity, the host said, "We are religious people. We help one another. We don't want revenge or trouble. We don't have weapons...we just want to live in peace."

A number of ethnic Kyrgyz families were also displaced. Many reside in government buildings, some with family. RI also met 100 ethnic Kyrgyz who fled their homes and farms in a Kyrgyz enclave inside Uzbekistan. When Uzbekistan closed its borders to control the flow of refugees, their access to services in Kyrgyzstan was lost. Tired of the

insecurity and isolation, they want their government to give them land inside the country's borders and suggested Uzbeks might prefer to live in the enclave, which borders a local Uzbek community. "Land is not important," they said. "Life is more important."

## STEERING THE COUNTRY BACK ON COURSE

While the outbreak of inter-ethnic strife surprised some, others saw plenty of warning signs. One man explained, "The last two years we felt pressured. It was not something that could be seen, but we could feel it – like job discrimination, for example." Another said, "I knew a year ago that tensions were high. You can't live where a neighbor hates you." Others noted Uzbek leaders supported the April overthrow of the Bakiyev government and that resulting violence increased tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz supporters of the former government. This violence had not been investigated. Nor, they said, was there an investigation of the 1990 violence against the Uzbeks. Kyrgyz too have long memories of injustices and are deeply scarred by June's events. "To forget this is impossible," one Kyrgyz said, noting that 50 Kyrgyz were missing.

The government of Kyrgyzstan needs to act unequivocally to restore peace and security, and must make reconciliation and an end to ethnic discrimination a national priority. Some suggested that rotating security, police and judicial officials from the south to duties elsewhere and bringing other northern officials to replace them could bring fresh eyes and energies to the task of restoring equal justice and the rule of law. At present local police and security forces are viewed as suspect or even averse to aiding Uzbeks, while intimidation, arbitrary detention, arrests, extortion and attacks on property continue.

On July 22, with Kyrgyzstan's agreement, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) voted to deploy 52 police advisors and translators to train and patrol with local police in the south. With this neutral presence and full national and local cooperation, all local complaints could be investigated and citizen trust in police gradually restored. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is seeking support to deploy additional legal advisors and monitors in the south.

During the violence and flight, many documents were destroyed or lost. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should expand the number of legal advisors and protection and documentation programs throughout the affected communities. The government is

collaborating with UNHCR to help residents obtain essential national identity and passport documents as well as death certificates and property deeds to permit them to travel freely and access services. The United States and other donor countries should assist these important efforts.

Uzbek and Kyrgyz victims repeatedly told RI that they need: full transparency by their government in documenting the numbers of deaths, injuries, arrests, and destroyed homes and businesses caused by the violence in both communities; government plans to compensate families of the killed or injured or property owners whose homes or businesses were damaged; and plans for rebuilding in Osh. “The problem is there are a lot of rumors. We have a lot of video and pictures in our hands regarding violence against people. Our mass media is bad...We want objective information... but since media is working poorly... we often believe rumors,” one interviewee explained.

With winter coming, rebuilding damaged homes should be a high priority. Donor governments should support reconstruction only if there are consultations and agreements reached between local residents and the government on fair damage compensation and respect for property rights. UNHCR leads the shelter effort and hopes to provide building materials for owners to construct a 50 square meter warm space on their property. UNHCR and some donors favor this over cash grants, given potential problems with prices and availability of building materials and concerns over corruption, intimidation or misuse of cash. The UN Refugee Agency is working with the government to help residents obtain destroyed property deeds which are vital for obtaining rebuilding aid from either the UN or government programs.

One hitch in reconstruction has been President Otunbayeva’s support for proceeding with plans to redevelop the city of Osh, replacing Uzbek homes and businesses with high rise apartment buildings and modern amenities like sport centers. For some in Osh it’s a plan for Uzbek removal, not urban renewal. Some suggested that the recent destruction matches aspects of this redevelopment plan.

While the government has the right to improve traffic flow and police and fire access, and to require safe construction practices, the rights of property owners and local residents

should be protected. Some compromises will be needed, since Uzbek families often prefer gated multi-generational homes, built around courtyards with space for parking and gardens. Another worrisome issue is some reports of minority residents being coerced into “signing over” their damaged property to avoid “problems.”

The international community should assist in the permanent rebuilding of destroyed and damaged homes and schools provided there is close consultation by the government with local homeowners and community residents on its reconstruction and redevelopment plans. Reconstruction schemes should also aid those physically unable to rebuild and utilize local procurement of materials in so far as it is possible.

Finally, an impartial international investigation of the events of June 10-14 must occur. “Without such an investigation there will be no justice,” said one returnee. Kyrgyzstan national and local government officials and security officials should be required to cooperate with such an inquiry. Otherwise, “People will be looking for their own justice.” Another man warned, “If you have a just and impartial investigation, you can move ahead. But if you just rebuild, you are simply sweeping the problem under the carpet and it will come back.”

The current situation is tense, even grim. Some interviewees feared they are losing their country. Others feel it is not too late, that Kyrgyzstan is a young country experiencing complex problems with many causes, requiring a multi-faceted solution including outside advice and aid. Economic recovery and development need to include all the ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. Building stronger civil society organizations, political parties and institutions is another critical, albeit long, process. And while it is still too early for reconciliation, the President and the country’s leaders must make all possible efforts to end violence, restore impartial security and establish a solid foundation for restoring inter-communal co-existence and trust in a shared future.

*Senior Advisor Dawn Calabria and Senior Advocate for Stateless Initiatives Maureen Lynch recently returned from a two week humanitarian assessment mission to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.*