

# Kyrgyz ethnic pogroms leave 2,000 dead, 400,000 homeless

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Interim Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva declared a state of emergency in southern Kyrgyzstan this weekend, after admitting that ethnic pogroms carried out between June 10 and June 14 had claimed 2,000 victims—10 times the previous official death toll. These deaths largely took place when ethnic Kyrgyz mobs attacked minority Uzbek communities in parts of southern Kyrgyzstan, including the cities of Osh and Jalalabad.

On June 17, the UN Humanitarian Office estimated over 400,000 people, or 8 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population, had fled their homes. This included 300,000 refugees inside Kyrgyzstan, and 100,000 people (not counting children) who left for neighbouring Uzbekistan. Prior to the fighting, the ethnic-Uzbek population of Kyrgyzstan was roughly 700,000, concentrated in the south of the country.

Many ethnic Uzbeks have fled to makeshift camps along the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, sections of which are sealed off by a barrier fence built by the Uzbek government. Red Cross officials said there were major shortages of food, water, shelter, and medicine.

Halima Otajonova, a mother of two at a refugee centre in Khanabad, Uzbekistan, told the BBC, "We need clothes and medical supplies, especially for the children, because when we fled our homes we just ran away and couldn't take anything with us. Some of us even ran away in bare feet, without shoes".

Paul Quinn-Judge, an official of the security think-tank International Crisis Group, said, "We're going to have an increasingly serious humanitarian problem, which is going to affect both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan. The reports from the Uzbek communities in Osh and in Jalalabad are so bloodcurdling that I doubt whether anyone will want to go back in the near future".

Some Uzbeks returning to their homes in Osh found them burnt to the ground.

Ole Solvang, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) official, said Osh faced serious humanitarian problems. "Some aid is coming into Osh", he noted, "but it does not reach the Uzbek neighbourhoods".

"They need medical assistance, just basic medicines. There are still injured people who need treatment. Food in particular, as well, is becoming a problem for some of these people who are sort of barricaded in their neighbourhoods. Water, pure,

drinkable water is also becoming a problem", Solvang added.

Violence continued yesterday in Kyrgyzstan, as Kyrgyz soldiers with heavy machinery pulled down makeshift barricades that Uzbeks had erected around their neighbourhoods. Two Uzbeks were killed and 25 wounded when police raided the village of Nariman, after dismantling its barricades.

The *New York Times* interviewed Bektemir Ergashev, a Kyrgyz guard at a checkpoint in Osh, who explained that violence had broken out after rumours began circulating that Uzbeks had raped Kyrgyz women in a dormitory. The *Times* added, "[P]olice and hospitals have never provided any confirmation that such an assault occurred".

The ethnic violence erupted two months after the overthrow of the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, following mass protests in the capital, Bishkek, against government corruption and a sharp rise in utility rates. After initial attempts to put down the protestors, the Kyrgyz armed forces split, with sections of the army joining protestors in an assault on the presidential palace and other government buildings. Bakiyev was succeeded by an interim government led by Otunbayeva, a Soviet-trained Kyrgyz diplomat with extensive ties to the West.

Bakiyev initially fled to southern Kyrgyzstan after his ouster, subsequently travelling to Belarus via Kazakhstan. Most Kyrgyz in the region support Bakiyev, according to press reports, while most Uzbeks support the new Otunbayeva regime.

Human-rights organizations are suggesting that the pogroms are linked to fighting between supporters of Otunbayeva and Bakiyev. Andrea Berg, a HRW field officer in Kyrgyzstan, told ABC News, "It seems now there is more and more information coming out that the family of the former president Bakiyev, who was ousted in violent clashes in the beginning of April, is behind this violence".

She added that the pogroms were taking place with the support of factions of the Kyrgyz armed forces linked to Bakiyev: "This source told me...Kyrgyz military were firing indiscriminately at Uzbek neighbourhoods. [She] also told me that she saw how Kyrgyz military would hand over weapons to Kyrgyz gangs [and that] Kyrgyz gangs would ride the tanks together with the Kyrgyz military".

While Emilbek Kaptagaev, chief of staff in the interim government, has denied any collusion between the government and fighters participating in anti-Uzbek pogroms, Otunbayeva has since stated that she is not fully in control of the armed forces.

Otunbayeva is resisting calls to postpone a constitutional referendum scheduled for June 26, aiming to give her government a legal basis. However, *Xinhua* reported yesterday that Otunbayeva introduced new regulations, under which the referendum could be cancelled if the country remains in the state of emergency.

Edil Baisalov, Otunbayeva's former chief of staff, told the *Financial Times* it was "amoral" and "short-sighted" to hold the referendum amid the current fighting.

OSCE official Rustam Akhmatakhunov told the *Financial Times*, "The result of the referendum will be a cataclysm. Everyone knows this is a temporary government. Who will be next, nobody knows".

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discussed Kyrgyzstan in a telephone call Sunday. According to State Department spokesman Philip Crowley, "the ministers agreed that the issue of the upcoming referendum is the sovereign decision of Kyrgyzstan to make, and agreed to encourage the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to conduct it according to international standards with the monitoring support of OSCE and others".

The tragedy in Kyrgyzstan is the product above all of the dissolution of the USSR, engineered by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991 with the approval of Western imperialism, and the ongoing US colonial war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The first modern Kyrgyz-Uzbek tensions came in 1990, as nationalist elements within the Soviet bureaucracy stoked ethnic rivalries in Soviet Central Asia. Riots in the summer of 1990 left more than 200 dead.

As the Kyrgyz economy collapsed after the restoration of capitalism, over 200,000 Slavs and 50,000 ethnic Germans left Kyrgyzstan. During the 1990s, per capita income in Kyrgyzstan fell a stunning 50 percent, as Central Asian Stalinists introduced national borders and currencies, shut down state-owned enterprises, and imploded the region's industry and trade. The Kyrgyz economy has grown since largely thanks to remittances from inhabitants working abroad, and to its role as a transit point for opiates grown in US-occupied Afghanistan and headed to Russia and Europe.

Too poor to field a large army, the country relied on the Russian Army for security until 1999, and it still hosts Russian military bases today. After the September 11 attacks, Kyrgyzstan also began leasing Manas airbase to the US, as a major element of the US supply network for its occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Bakiyev came to power in 2005, after the US-backed "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan collapsed amid mass protests. His family, and particularly his son Maxim, reportedly benefited

enormously from padded contracts paid by the US government for servicing the Manas airbase.

Conditions in Kyrgyzstan were ignored by Western media and officials. At the time of Bakiyev's re-election last July, Johns Hopkins University's *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* wrote, "The issue of possible public protests scarcely seems to be a headache for the government.... The population displayed a general apathy towards politics, kindled by the opposition's weakness and cemented by a growing awareness that Bakiyev, unlike his predecessor, is ready to defend his regime through harsh measures". The publication concluded Bakiyev was "the best choice so far".

Bakiyev was, in short, viewed as an acceptable NATO ally in Central Asia—a region increasingly vital to the Afghan occupation, and sitting along burgeoning trade routes between China, Russia, and the Middle East. This situation now intensifies fears, however, of international conflict if major powers began to intervene in Kyrgyzstan.

During the worst of the recent pogroms, Otunbayeva called on Russia to send peacekeeping troops. While noting that "the situation in the south of Kyrgyzstan is close to a humanitarian catastrophe", Russian President Dmitri Medvedev declined her request on June 18.

"Our Kyrgyz partners have so far recalled their request, in essence, because they should cope with this situation themselves. It is an internal problem. And I hope that they will be able to finally settle it", he said. However, there is ongoing speculation as to whether, and under what conditions, Russia, under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, might intervene.

While the US has so far stated it is only prepared to offer humanitarian aid, it is being put under pressure by the Kyrgyz regime to offer greater support. Washington operates an airbase in the country that is critical to the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan. The Otunbayeva regime has threatened to revoke the US lease on its facility at Manas, if the Obama administration does not use its authority to get London to extradite Maxim Bakiyev, the son the former president and a major power figure, who is currently detained by UK secret services in Britain.



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